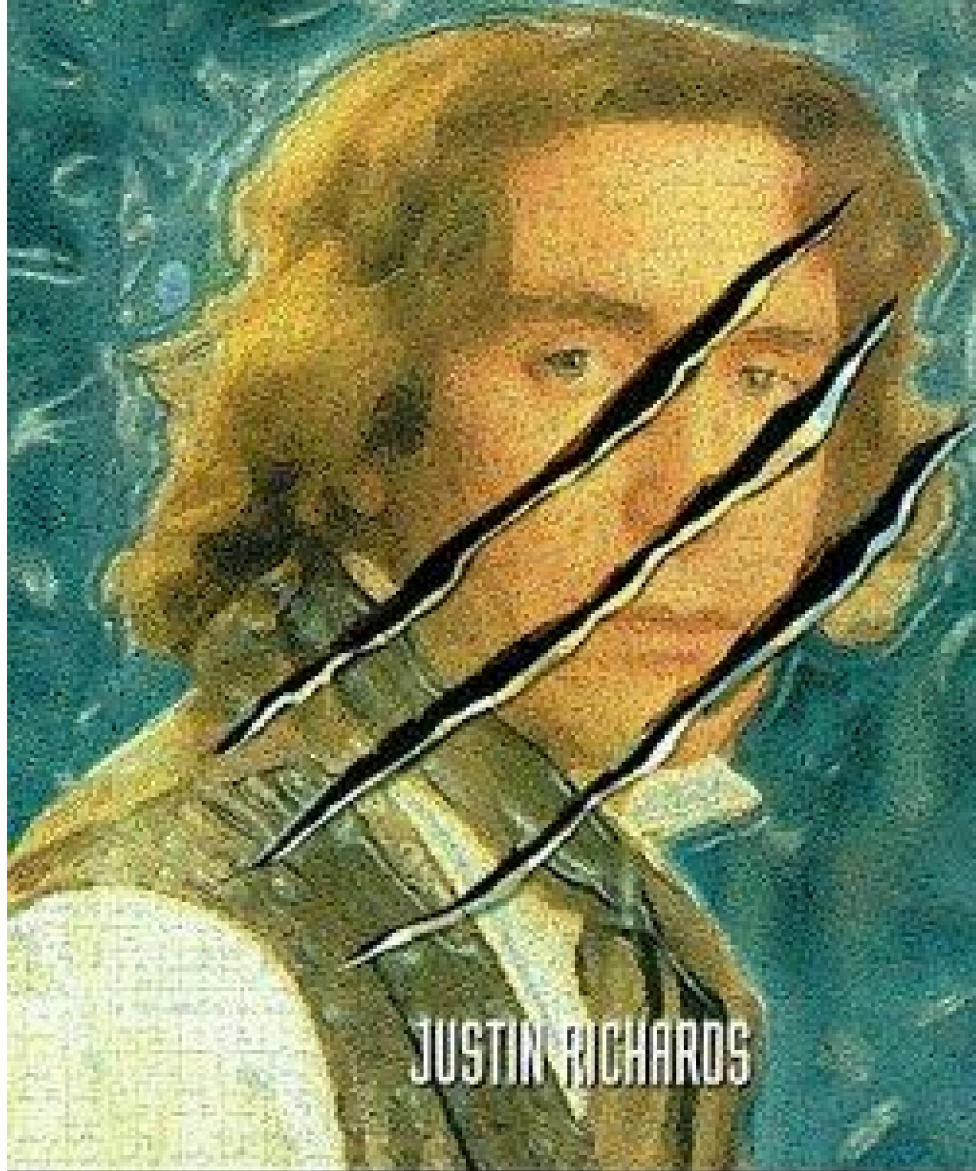


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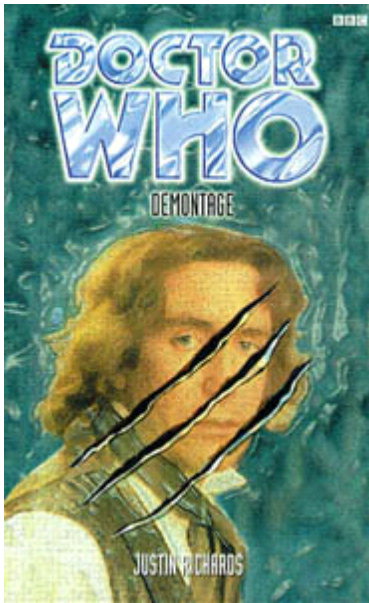
DEMONTAGE



JUSTIN RICHARDS

DOCTOR WHO

Demontage



An Eighth Doctor Ebook

By Justin Richards

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Demontage

By Justin Richards

For Alison, Julian and Christian, with love.

Chapter One

Background

A thin line of viscous spittle dripped from the huge figure's massive jutting jaw and the yellow, stained teeth gleamed in the harsh light. The enormous, hairy creature drew itself up to its full height, towering over the humanoids seated in the cabin, its wolflike head swaying from side to side as it surveyed the passengers through rheumy, red eyes. One paw clenched at the beast's side, the claws thrusting through the mass of tangled, matted brown hair as a low growl rumbled ominously round the ship.

There had already been a thrill of anticipation in the air. In the fourth row, Mrs Antherzon had a tingling in her stomach as she exchanged glances with her husband. For once in her life she was experiencing an element of the unknown, the daring - a risk even - in the journey.

The passengers were all Battrulians, and most of them had probably never before ventured away from Battrul. At least, Mrs Antherzon reflected, she and her husband had travelled widely, had experienced the spa resorts of Crastis Major, the sunshine and sand of Tamba Bay where you could lie back in the warm evening and stare up at the distant stars. But somehow those well-organised, package tours seemed tame compared with the current excitement. Here they were now, out among those distant stars, watching the dreaded Canvine homework! loom ever closer on the sim-screen in front of them.

She held tight to her ancient husband's arm, her blue-tinted hair falling over his shoulder. Beside the Antherzons, a honeymoon couple who had ticked the wrong box in the brochure and had expected by now to be tucked up in a zero-grav bed on Pleasurama huddled together for warmth and comfort.

Only one man, seated directly in front of Mrs Antherzon, seemed less than enthralled by it all. He sat quietly, as he had for the entire trip, looking round at the other passengers and yawning. There was an empty seat either side of him, which seemed to emphasise his isolation from the group spirit of the others. Soon after liftoff, Mrs Antherzon had tried to engage him in conversation. It had been a hopeless task. It seemed as difficult to get an opinion from the man as it was to prevent her husband from voicing one.

And then there was the clicking. At first she had thought it was his tongue. But, glancing down over the seat back after the aborted conversation, she had noticed that the quiet clicking sound was made by the two dice he rolled together in his hand, opening his fist occasionally to see what numbers were uppermost.

But now everyone's eyes were on the front screen, watching as the image of Canvine faded away to reveal the real stars and systems outside the ship. The buffer zone. Dead space. The end of civilisation as they knew it.

And just as Mrs Antherzon had decided that enough was enough, and now might be a good time to turn back and head for Vega Station, this large hairy shape hauled itself into view at the front of the passenger deck.

The growl turned into a cough. The clenched paw waved for quiet. And instantly got it. The Canvine's voice was gruff and hollow, a throaty rumble that echoed round the deck of the tour ship. 'Welcome to the buffer-zone excursion,' the creature said, teeth thrust out in what Mrs Antherzon could only guess was a determined attempt at a smile. 'My name is Caruso, and I shall be your guide for this brief tour of the forbidden area. I trust you have all enjoyed the comfort and service of the trip so far, and I can assure you that we shall soon be making our way around the edge of the zone towards Vega Station.'

Like most of the passengers, she had never see a Canvine before this flight, except in newsreel vids of the war and in history books. Up close, the enormous hairy reality seemed to dwarf her expectations.

Caruso's teeth jutted out further to accompany his observation: 'I trust you all have enough credit to enjoy the casino, the art galleries and exhibitions, the opera and any other -' he paused, as if searching for the right word in the Batttrulian language - 'entertainment that takes your fancy.'

There was some polite, if slightly nervous, laughter, though Mrs Antherzon could not for the life of her see the joke. She nudged her husband, embarrassed by his dry cackle.

Caruso, by contrast, was enjoying himself immensely. This was the part

he enjoyed most, scaring them half to death just by standing up and telling them what they already knew. What they feared. 'We were looking just now at Canvine itself,' he said, keeping his voice low, with a hint of danger in it. 'The homeworld of my race - my home, although I have lived on Vega for many years now. In fact, Canvine is seventeen light years from here, and barely visible. The buffer zone between our worlds is two light years in diameter, and officially no ships have entered it since the treaty was agreed.' He paused, surveying the room, playing to the eager, nervous faces arranged in front of him. 'Officially,' he stressed. The woman in the fourth row, the one with the light-blue hair clutching her husband's arm, was really going for it. 'But Caruso Excursions has never played by the book, and so today we - you - will enter the buffer zone.'

Gasps from everyone. Except for the tall man sitting alone in the third row - right in front of his star passenger - who seemed rather bored with the whole thing. Caruso had watched him yawn twice and read through the safety card three times since he started his spiel. He frowned at the man, but to no avail.

Caruso went on with his standard patter: 'Yes, despite the treaty, despite the Battrulian and Canvine patrol ships, despite the minefields and smart detectors, we will today venture across the border and into the buffer zone. He held up his paw again for silence, despite the fact that there was not a sound from his clients. Blue-rinse was now tugging her husband towards her, she was holding on so tightly. 'Dangerous, yes,' Caruso admitted. 'But a calculated risk, and a very minor incursion. However, I do urge you to read through the safety-instruction card again to familiarise yourselves in particular with the emergency procedures in the event of a missile strike.'

There was a general rummaging and fumbling for the cards. Except from the man in the third row. He was looking at Caruso with a slight, almost mocking, smile. Caruso grinned back. If the man guessed that they would actually be going nowhere near the buffer zone, then that was fine. The others were a picture - already sweating with fear, already working out how to describe their death-defying trip to friends, children, grandchildren... If they ever saw them again.

While most of the passengers studied the safety card with renewed interest, Caruso pointed out various stars and systems on the screen. 'We have lived in peace - Battrul and Canvine - for fifty years now,' he said at last. 'And, while we have kept each other at arm's length, there

have been many changes on both our worlds. We have each suffered massive hardships and devastated economies. You know better than I the disastrous effects of the massive interest rates you have endured during the rebuilding of your planetary economy. Now, with the democratic elections on your world and the induction of President Drexler replacing the military leadership that has been in charge on Battul since the war, there are many on my world who hope for a more solid peace treaty than the uneasy armistice currently in place.'

Behind Caruso, exactly on cue, a warning message flashed up on the screen:

.. .NOW ENTERING BUFFER ZONE...
.. .FASTEN SEAT BELTS. ..
.. .PREPARE FOR UNEXPECTED IMPACT. ..

'Let us hope,' Caruso growled quietly 'that it is not we who will be the ones to jeopardise that hope for lasting peace.' He looked round the pale faces turned towards him, doing his best to make it look as if he were trying to hide his own worry and fear. Blue-rinse's husband was holding one of the specially provided paper bags in a strategic position, Caruso noticed as he returned to his seat. He made a show of strapping himself in tightly.

Despite the number of people crowded into the room, the noise was subdued, muted by the high ceiling and panelled walls. The sounds of clinking glasses, of gaming chips being slapped down on the tables, of hushed - and not so hushed - conversations, and of the croupiers calling for final bets and announcing winners and losers were drained through the vaulted doorways and absorbed by the plush upholstery.

Samantha Jones was feeling undepressed and unappreciated. She sat at a small, round, wooden table in a dimly lit corner of the casino, alone apart from a tall, slim cocktail. The barman had assured her that it was non-alcoholic, which removed one possible cause for her encroaching headache. There were two other possible causes close at hand, however. One was sitting at a card table across the room. The other was lounging nonchalantly against the bar thoroughly failing to engage any of the many attractive women in any form of conversation.

To say that Sam had been less than enthusiastic about the idea of

visiting the Vega Station would be something of an understatement. And that had been before the Doctor and Fitz had decided that it would be the ideal place to indulge in a small competition. She had been here for almost two days now, and couldn't wait to leave. Boys!

That was what they were. Big boys, true. 'Old' even. But still boys. Playing games. Literally. Despite having known the Doctor for so long, she had still been surprised at the childlike grin and innocent pleasure he had displayed at Fitz's suggestion that they see who could win the most at the casino in a week.

A week.

Sam took a deep gulp of the burning pink liquid and wondered not for the first time in the hour what antifreeze might taste like.

So, rather than use the winnings from his previous visit ('Oh that was ages ago, years, soon after the place opened, in fact - er, about when I thought we'd be arriving this time, actually'), the Doctor and Fitz were each starting with a float of a hundred plaudits. Or, rather, the Doctor was starting. Fitz was propping up the bar. 'Psychology,' he had confided to Sam when she suggested he might do better by actually trying to win something at backgammon, roulette, baccarat or poker.

The Doctor, as ever, seemed in his element. A small crowd of various life forms, though mainly local Battrulians, had gathered round the table where he was playing. Sam watched the ebb and flow as people arrived, became interested, then discovered the ludicrously low stakes of the game and wandered off. Sam's initial enthusiasm for the Doctor's winnings the previous day had tailed off somewhat when she worked out that it was about enough to buy a packet of crisps from the bar.

'Best to keep things low-key,' the Doctor had confided to her. 'Don't want to seem to be encouraging gambling, now do we?'

'Don't we?' Sam asked, lacing her response with the sarcasm she reckoned it deserved.

But the Doctor seemed not to notice. 'Good gracious me, no. No, no, no. Besides,' he added, 'you can get carried away, you know. Look what happened last time.' And with that he had returned to the roulette table.

Had she been more enthusiastic about the place, Sam might have been

tempted to explore, to venture outside the hotel/casino and see what other joys Vega held in store for her. But she was quite settled now in her self-indulgent ennui. From where she sat she could watch Fitz at the bar -ridiculously out of place in his dark dinner suit complete with tuxedo. She could see the Doctor trivially enjoying himself at the gaming table. She could watch the comings and goings through the main doors of the casino. And she could see the magnificent view out of the windows.

The hotel took up a whole section of Vega, and the casino occupied an entire floor of the hotel. It was on the outer rim of the station, and the huge curved windows gave out directly into space .The starscape was awesome, a huge nebula gave an uneven splash of colour across the middle, around which bright pinpoint stars seemed to cluster. At the extreme edges, the view was slightly distorted by the curvature of the thick glass, so that two planetary systems in particular - one at each side - seemed magnified, emphasised.

A day ago, Sam had decided she would never tire of such a view. Now she had decided she was wrong. In fact, the only real excitement since they checked into their rooms at the only hotel two days ago had been that morning...

The hotel joined the casino. A large double doorway opened from the hotel foyer into the entrance hall of the casino, allowing guests to pass immediately from one to the other. This was obviously convenient for the guests, and, since both establishments were apparently run by the same staff, made obvious commercial sense.

But, the Doctor had discovered while snooping round in his usual can't-leave-anything-alone way that morning, that there was also a narrow corridor that ran between the two. One end was practically hidden close to the toilets in the hotel foyer, and the other emerged behind a large potted plant in the casino. He had spent a pointless few minutes leading Fitz and Sam back and forth along the corridor, admiring the wooden panelling on the walls and the objets d'art in the alcoves. And commenting on how useless the corridor itself was.

'Maybe it was here before they put the doors in?' Fitz suggested.

The Doctor glared, as if this were the most outlandish suggestion imaginable. Perhaps, Sam reflected, given that they were on a space

station, it was.

Her own offer had been, 'Art.'

'What?' The Doctor leaned forward and screwed his eyes up as if to see better who had made such a lunatic comment.

'It's here because it's artistically and architecturally correct,' Sam said. 'It looks nice, that's all there is to it.'

'Then why not make something of it?' the Doctor asked. 'No no, no, no, no,' he decided. 'That's not it at all.'

'The purpose of art is to disturb,' Sam said. 'And it's got you going.'

But the Doctor wasn't listening. 'Then there's this wall,' he said as if they had satisfactorily concluded the previous conversation.

'It's just a wall, for God's sake,' Fitz said. He rapped on a wooden panel with his knuckles to make the point. And winced.

'Is it?' The Doctor was off again, back towards the casino. He poked his head round the potted plant and stared for a while at the wall that ran along the back of the corridor.

Then he strode to the other end of the corridor, and repeated the process. This time he leaned into the entrance of the women's toilets to get a good view of the wall he was interested in. Which in turn led to some interest in himself. He ignored it.

Back in the middle of the corridor, the Doctor tapped on the wall, drumming his fingers on the wooden panel. Then he suddenly stuffed his hands into his jacket pocket and set off towards the casino. 'I think it's just an architectural feature,' he said airily. 'Though you could get another room in behind there if you'd a mind to.'

Told you,' said Sam.

'Is he getting worse?' Fitz asked her. 'Or am I imagining it?'

That had been this morning's excitement. Hardly earth-shattering.

'May I?'

The voice startled Sam out of her reverie. It was slightly husky, controlled and soft. Unmistakably female.

'You look bored,' the woman continued as she sat down.

'You like bored people?' Sam asked. 'You seek them out with a passion, hoping to cheer them up perhaps? A mission is it? A calling?'

The woman paused. Her hands were folded under her chin, her elbows about to touch down on the table top. 'I'm sorry,' she said quietly as she stood up again. 'I won't bother you.'

'No, no,' Sam said at once. She had reacted without looking, had spoken into space - spoken to herself rather than reply to a person. A human being. The woman was probably as bored as she was, as in need of company. 'I'm sorry. That was rude. Please sit down.'

'You're sure?'

Sam nodded.

The woman sat down. 'In a sense, perhaps I do seek out bored people. Only they usually don't realise that they're bored. Or that they are sought out.'

She was about Sam's age. Perhaps slightly older. Her face was a symmetrical oval that Sam envied almost as much as her cascading mass of red hair. It tumbled loosely over her shoulders in a haphazard manner that must have taken forever to orchestrate. Her green velvet dress was cut very low and very tight. Everything about the woman, her appearance, her voice, the smell of her perfume, was designed to make an impression, to be memorable. And Sam could certainly remember having seen her around the casino several times in the last couple of days. Usually drinking champagne. Always with a different man.

'I'm Sam. And you're right, I'm bored.'

'With so much to do?' The woman raised a perfectly pencilled eyebrow. At the same time she glanced briefly over her shoulder towards a barman. It was enough to bring him scurrying over.

'Vermilion,' she said as the barman arrived. 'Vermilion Kenyan.' It took Sam a moment to realise that this was her name and not a drink.

'Champagne for two?' the barman asked.

Vermilion shook her head. 'Get us a beer, will you. Trew?' She looked at Sam.

'Nothing for me, thanks. I'm fine with whatever this is.'

'Beer?' Trew asked nervously. 'Wouldn't you rather -'

'No I wouldn't,' Vermilion told him sharply. 'I'm off duty. This is a friend. Pleasure, not business.'

Trew gulped. 'Stabilo will go spare.'

'Let him. He's always going spare. Once more won't hurt.' Vermilion smiled at the man, her whole face transforming into a vision of beauty as she patted his hand. 'Get us a beer, Trew. There's a love. I'll owe you.'

Trew said nothing for a moment. Then he smiled back weakly, and nodded. 'OK. Beer. Right.'

'Prat,' Vermilion muttered as soon as he was gone. 'You get sick of champagne,' she added to Sam.

'You work here?'

Vermilion nodded. 'You noticed. Yes. Sometimes I work the tables, deal the cards. But usually...' Her voice tailed off as she looked over her shoulder again. 'Where's that beer?'

'Usually you let people buy you champagne,' Sam finished for her. 'At a hugely marked-up price.'

'And help them lose their money at the tables.'

'Well,' Sam said, 'you're on to a loser with me. I don't drink champagne, and I haven't a clue how to play any of the games. No interest either.'

'Then why are you here?'

Sam shrugged. 'To look at the view.'

Vermilion's beer arrived, in what looked like a pint glass. It looked incongruous, held carefully in Vermilion's slender hand as she took a sip.

'I'm surprised they allow beer in a place like this,' Sam said.

'It's really for the Canvines. Not that we get very many any more. They mainly drink beer and eat crisps. Stabulo draws the line at raw meat - he says crisps and dramm scratchings are as far as he'll go. If they want to indulge their filthy habits on Vega, they can do it at the opera.' She smiled. 'He says.'

Sam had no idea what a Can vine was. But she was not about to admit it. Instead she pointed to a nearby table where four men sat playing cards. 'I've been watching them,' she said, 'trying to work out the rules. But it seems very confusing.'

'It is.' Vermilion took another delicate sip of beer, then wiped the back of her hand across her mouth to remove the froth. 'I don't know the other two,' she said, 'but the two sitting sideways to us are Newark Rappare and Ambrose Forster.'

'Regulars?'

'They run an antique and curio business on Level Two. Not a good team to watch if you want to learn how to play properly, though.'

Sam looked at the men Vermilion had pointed out. One, Rappare, was a short broad man dressed in an short cape and tall felt hat. He held a black, silver-topped cane in one hand, leaning it against his leg when he played a card. The other man, Forster, sat in a motorised wheelchair, but Sam could tell he was tall and willowy. He wore a single one-piece outfit in light grey that made him look even thinner.

Even his hair was thin and grey. 'You mean they're no good at cards?'

Vermilion laughed. 'I mean they cheat.'

'Really?' Sam looked back at them. Rappare was just collecting the pile of winnings from the middle of the table. 'They don't look like cheats.'

'If they did, they couldn't cheat. But you're on Vega, and here nothing looks like what it is. Nothing is what it seems.' Vermilion pointed across the room at the huge windows and the starscape beyond. 'That view, for example.'

'What about it?'

'You think it's coincidence that Battrul and Canvine are so prominent?' She was pointing at the planetary systems magnified at each extreme of the view. 'That the two opposing power blocs just happen to be visible from here? I know that Vega is an embarrassing blip on the edge of Battrulian space, that it is an embarrassment precisely because it is so remote -because it can indulge its visitors in gambling, tax-free shopping, and a dozen other vices forbidden back home. And being so close to the buffer zone we get a few Canvines who come here for the opera or the galleries and exhibitions. But even so...'

'Even so what?' Sam was confused.

'Even so, neither system is really close enough to be visible to the naked eye.'

Sam frowned. 'Are you saying the view's magnified in some way? Like through a telescope?'

Vermilion shook her head. 'There is no view,' she said. 'It's an image. A holographic fake.' She took another sip of beer and leaned forward. 'So why are you here?'

Sam sighed. 'My friends,' she said, 'are having a competition to see who can win the most money. I'm supposed to be the judge. Make sure they stay in line. Don't cheat. Whatever.'

'Your friends being the weirdo,' Vermilion said, nodding towards where the Doctor was seated, 'and the other weirdo.'

She pointed to the bar.

Fitz waved back, and raised his martini in an extravagant toast. Some of the drink slopped over the edge and on to the man next to him. Sam looked away. 'You noticed,' she said.

Vermilion shrugged. 'You came in together. And you booked into the

hotel together.'

'How did you know that?'

'It's my job to know that.' Vermilion's eyes widened slightly as she was speaking. 'Heck, there's Stabilo. I'd better get back to work.'

Sam turned to see who Vermilion was talking about. She saw a big man, perhaps in his forties, immaculately dressed in a pink suit. Bright pink. The cuffs and collar were trimmed with white lace, and he wore a pair of white gloves. His hair was slicked back and oiled so that it glistened. He was walking across the casino, taking short careful steps and nodding greetings to people as he went. His hands were constantly in motion, clutched in front of him or pulling at his lapels, or adjusting his lemon-yellow tie.

Vermilion had drained her glass and stood up. 'Nice talking to you,' she said. 'But do yourself a favour - get out and see some of the sights. The real sights. There's an exhibition of Martinique's work opening soon on Level Five, you know. Kind of weird, I'm told, but at least it's art.'

'Thanks,' Sam said as the woman stood up. 'But I was always taught that art was just an imitation of life.'

Vermilion turned back, her red hair swinging round in perfect harmony. 'So is this place,' she said. 'Believe me.'

There is something about the offices of bank managers the cosmos over. Somehow they all look and smell the same. A clinical mixture of wood panelling and soft carpet. The faint whiff of banknotes and warm coinage. Which was odd, reflected Oona Klapton, since the only currencies that the Vega Central Bank dealt in were the encoded gaming chip and the electronic transfer of funds across space. If you used cash on Vega, you were on your own.

Cy Slavich, the meticulously manicured manager of the bank, glanced up at Oona, peering at her myopically over the top of his gold-rimmed spectacles. So archetypal. So predictably old-fashioned. Oona smiled at him. She had spent enough time with bank managers not to be intimidated. She was the customer, after all. He worked for her, whatever he might think.

'Yes,' Slavich said at length. His voice was a high-pitched nasal whine ideally suited to his short, plump form. "That appears to be in order.' He leaned forward across the desk, a layer of fat spreading across the top as his stomach met the mahogany. 'If you could just authenticate the transfer, we'll have your funds sent direct to your bank back on Bartrul.'

Oona took the chip from him. She held the small, mock-wooden oval in her palm and pressed her thumb into the recess on the top. Of course, she could have done this at any of the cashiers' desks on the main banking floor, but she preferred to deal only with the top people. She held her thumb in place long enough for the chip to register her pulse rate and amount of perspiration. She felt the tiny jab as it scraped away a few cells of skin for DNA analysis, checking who she was as well as ensuring that she was not under undue stress. It was checking that she was making the transfer of her own free will. She twisted her thumb anticlockwise a quarter turn, the gesture required to sign the chip over to another party, then handed it back to Slavich.

'Thank you, Miss Klaption.' He slotted the chip into a small reader set into the surface of the desk in front of him. A discreet display showed the number of plaudits credited to the chip, and Slavich raised an eyebrow. Oona smiled, unaware that he always did this.

'Interest rates are still favourable,' she said. "Though nothing like the boom those of us with savings experienced after the war.' She liked to show she knew a little about finance.

'I'll have that amount transferred to your bank immediately,' Slavich reassured her. 'It will be there this afternoon.' He leaned back and somehow managed to pull open the centre drawer of his desk over his stomach. From inside he retrieved a receipt book and a fountain pen.

Oona took the receipt, inspected it, folded it and put it in her clutch bag. She was about to speak, to thank Slavich for his time and trouble, when there was a knock at the door behind her. She frowned. How dare someone interrupt her time with the bank manager? From the expression on Slavich's face, he was as surprised and annoyed as she was.

She heard the door open, even before Slavich could acknowledge the knock. He blinked, nodded to whoever was at the door, and then smiled uneasily to Oona. 'I'm afraid I must go, Miss Klaption,' he oozed.

Oona turned, but the door was closed again. And suddenly Slavich was beside her, helping her to her feet and shaking her hand in a single motion. Guiding her towards the door. She was too surprised, too annoyed, to say anything. What, no sherry? was the single thought that seemed to occupy her mind as she found herself back in the bank foyer. She looked round, slightly bewildered, barely registering the fact that her clutch bag had dropped to the polished marble floor.

'Madam.' The woman was holding her bag, handing it back to her. Oona Klaption took it without a word and made her way with as much dignity as she could muster towards the main exit. Her high heels cracked loudly on the floor and people turned to watch as she passed. She was almost at the door when the woman who had retrieved her bag called across the foyer.

'Don't mention it.'

Oona Klaption froze, for an instant, in mid-step. Had she turned, she might have registered that the woman was in uniform, might have realised that she was Cassey Cage, Vega's head of security. She might even have wondered what she was doing in the Vega Central Bank, standing outside the manager's office on a Monday afternoon. But she did not. She gritted her teeth, felt her face redden, and left without looking back -without seeing Cage smile as she let herself - this time without knocking - into the manager's office.

For Fitz it was like a dream come true. He had always had a thing about casinos, had always fancied himself as a cool, wealthy, mysterious gambler. It had probably started when he'd read Casino Royale , and seeing Dr No had certainly not cured him of it.

Which was why he was so desperate to make an impression. And why he had sneaked down to the casino the first night, clutching the gaming chip that represented the plaudits the Doctor had given him for their wager. He wanted a little practice, wanted to be sure he got it right before he performed for Sam and the Doctor. And what a performance it would be.

The dark suit and black bow tie from the TARDIS wardrobe had been perfect. The Doctor's machine might not be able to hit the target exactly

on time, but it knew how to dress for the occasion. He helped himself to a spare seat at the roulette wheel, and tapped his chip on his fingers, watching to see what everyone else did.

The croupier reached out and took the chip from him. Fitz was surprised and barely stifled a cry, turning it into a grunt of appreciation as the croupier slotted the chip into some sort of device, and then handed Fitz several smaller wooden gaming chips in return.

"Thank you," Fitz said, keeping his voice deep. He reached for his cigarette case. Then realised he didn't have one, and pulled out a battered packet of Camels instead. His last. Maybe his last ever. Which would please Sam if nobody else. He tapped out a cigarette. "The name's Kreiner," he said as he put it to his mouth. 'Fitz Kreiner.' But nobody seemed to be listening.

The wheel was spinning. Fitz watched its hypnotic motion, reaching for his silver lighter as he did. A Ronson would be nice. But all he could run to was a box of Swan Vestas. He shielded the match as he took it to the cigarette. That was good. He blew out a stream of smoke and leaned forward to place his chips. He put half on thirteen. Lucky thirteen.

Beside him a woman started to cough, caught in the full blast of the smoke. As he leaned back, ash dropped from Fitz's cigarette on to the felt edging the table. He brushed it away quickly, aware of the croupier's stern gaze. 'Sorry,' he muttered.

The woman was still coughing. A man next to her had started to clear his throat in a rather pointed manner too. 'Sorry,' Fitz said again. He held the cigarette away from them, almost stubbing it into the man on his other side. 'Sorry.'

Fitz looked round for the ashtray. There wasn't one.

God, didn't they smoke here? 'Sorry,' he said. He wasn't sure what he was apologising for this time, but it did no harm to keep in credit with the apologies. Everyone seemed to be looking at him now. He smiled, swallowed, gritted his teeth, and stubbed the cigarette out on the heel of his left hand. It couldn't be that bad.

'Aaah.' It was worse. 'Sorry. Sorry, everyone.'

The wheel had stopped. Everyone was looking at him again. 'What?' he

asked, sure he had committed another faux pas, another social gaffe to add to the collection. Things were not going quite according to plan here.

'You've won,' the woman beside him breathed. Her voice was husky, and Fitz hoped it was from her appreciation and awe. But he suspected it was the cigarette smoke.

'Have I?' he said. 'I mean, well, yeah, right. Of course.' He gathered in the chips the croupier raked towards him. 'Thanks, mate. Er, my good man. Sir.'

Everyone was still looking at him. Here was Fitz's chance to redeem the situation. He stuck his chin out slightly, wagging his head to try to loosen the wing collar that was tight round his perspiring neck. 'Black,' he said confidently, pushing his chips forward. 'Everything on black. The lot.' He was on a roll here.

There were not the gasps of astonishment at his recklessness that he had expected. But at least there were several raised eyebrows. He sat back, arms folded, and watched as the wheel spun again. A dream come true.

The wheel slowed, the ball rolling noisily over the numbered compartments. Then the ball stopped, though the wheel was still spinning. And the dream became a nightmare.

Red.

It had stopped on red. On six. He had thought about putting everything on six, really he had. Or red. But he hadn't done it. He'd gone for black. And it stopped on red.

The croupier handed back Fitz his chip. 'Your balance is zero, sir,' he told him.

'Thanks,' said Fitz, thickly. 'Thanks a lot.' He stood up, slightly shakily. 'Easy come, easy go,' he said with almost convincing levity. 'Well, see you all tomorrow night, then.'

As he mooched his way across the casino, hands deep in his trouser pockets, staring at the floor, Fitz struggled to think of how he could convincingly explain to the Doctor and Sam why he was not actually taking part in any gambling during the week ahead.

Of course, it would be easy and sensible to confess and ask for more money, or just concede defeat right now. So that was right out.

Vega's chief executive officer let himself into Slavich's office quietly and discreetly. He was keen not to draw undue attention to his visit to the bank manager. It might raise some awkward questions, especially if anyone realised that the Vega head of security was at the same meeting. Since nobody outside a very limited group knew that Vega even had a CEO, these were questions he could do without.

But, despite the clandestine nature of the meeting, it was something of a relief to drop the pretence and merely be himself, he reflected, as he took the seat behind Slavich's desk.

Slavich had tactfully moved to one of the chairs in front of the desk and looked as if he might obscure it completely, so far did his body extend beyond the seat on either side. He seemed uncomfortable in more ways than one.

'Has Cage briefed you?' the CEO asked.

Slavich shook his head.

'I only just got here, sir,' Cage admitted. She was seated close to Slavich, her tall thin form accentuating his bulk, making him seem even shorter and fatter. Her short, grey hair was a contrast to the bank manager's oiled black tangle.

'So what is it you want to discuss this time?' Slavich asked. 'Some minor indiscretion concerning the hotel deposits, perhaps?'

The CEO leaned forward, resting his elbows on Slavich's desk and looking down at him. 'Our meetings are never precipitated by minor events, Slavich, you know that. So I'll assume your misplaced sarcasm is due to your annoyance at having your immaculate routine interrupted for an hour. May we proceed?'

Slavich made a vague grunting noise and toed at the carpet.

'Thank you.' The CEO settled back in the chair. "There are two matters

we should discuss with some urgency. The first is the President's visit.'

'She's definitely coming then?' Cage asked.

The CEO nodded. 'She wants to see Vega at first hand. To see what we do here, what we really do here, for herself. There's an official story, of course, and Phillips is making the security arrangements.'

'So how are we involved? Apart from whatever local cover Phillips asks for?'

Slavich snorted. 'Listen to yourselves,' he said. 'Official cover stories, security arrangements, secret missions.' He looked from the CEO to the head of security. 'All that was over years ago. Nobody cares about it now. It's over. Vega is here to make a profit, and it does that very well indeed.'

'Thanks to you?' Cage suggested.

Slavich spread a pudgy hand and inspected his fingernails. 'In part. But also because of the environment we have all created here. We've made something of this. Something out of nothing.' He looked up at the CEO. 'Can't you see that? From what we started with, what we were charged to do, we've really made a go of it. Transcended our original goals and expectations. Think back to what the place was like when we arrived, when you took over.'

'That may be true. But it is secondary to other things.'

'I don't agree.'

'Oh? I think you might in a moment. But let's finish with the President first.'

Slavich shrugged, a movement that involved his whole round body seeming to lift slightly then sag back into place.

'So, officially, why is she coming?' Cage asked.

'There is an exhibition of paintings by Toulour Martinique about to open. The President is apparently very interested in Martinique's unique work.'

Cage laughed. A single short outburst of sound. 'He was a nutter. Have

you seen any of that stuff? I helped check the crates and run the weapons scan when they came in the other day.' She shook her head. 'Some seriously weird pictures. One seriously weird guy. If he were still alive I doubt anyone would have heard of him.'

The CEO smiled. "The purpose of art is to disturb," he said quietly.

'Certainly disturbed him.' She sucked at her bottom lip, then said, 'Our contingency plans for the visit are proceeding according to schedule.'

'Good. The security arrangements Phillips has proposed seem even slacker than we expected. Even with the strict controls we have on weaponry here, it would be all too easy for something to happen.'

Cage agreed. 'I don't know why she keeps Phillips on. I thought he'd go with the others after the election.'

'He's supposed to be an unelected official. A non-political.'

Slavich snorted again. 'Even I know that's a joke,' he said.

'So why didn't she sack him?' Cage asked. 'Get a new chief of staff?'

'Too much too quick,' Slavich said. 'She'll get rid of him. But she can't be seen to act too swiftly clearing out the old regime. Her majority over the military junta was not as great as she hoped - many people still hate and fear the Canvine enough to feel we need the military holding on to the reigns of power.' He waved his hand heavily in the air. 'Whatever.'

'Given your obvious interest in this matter,' the CEO said, 'I assume you'd be happy for Cage and myself to handle it from now on?'

'Oh please.' Slavich shifted uncomfortably on the chair. 'Are we done now? Can you go?'

'No. Not yet. There is one other small matter we should discuss.' The CEO leaned forward, fixing Slavich with a hard stare. 'And this does concern you. You and your precious bank.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. He has arrived,' the CEO said simply.

Slavich stared back, obviously not understanding. 'What? Who?' Then his eyebrows lifted and the colour drained slowly from his face. 'You don't mean?' He gulped. 'You do mean...'

'We picked up the ident yesterday. It didn't show up at any of the docking or embarkation areas, so we thought maybe it was a false reading. An error:

'But it isn't?'

'No. He's here. Somewhere. I doubt he'd be stupid enough to come to you, Slavich, without witnesses and records, otherwise it would be an easy problem to solve. Maybe a remote transaction?'

If was possible, Slavich seemed to be sagging even more than ever now. 'After all this time,' he said quietly. 'Why now? What with the President coming as well...'

'It's because it's been all this time, as you put it, that we have the problem,' Cage pointed out.

'If only we'd been here the first time. If I had been here. They should never have let him leave without...' Slavich's voice tailed off. 'If someone with a proper financial background had been involved in setting this place up, rather than leaving this time bomb ticking away for us to discover and try to plan for...' He broke off, shaking his head in a mixture of sadness and near despair.

'Could we just steal the thing back?' Cage suggested.

'He'll have thought of that,' Slavich said. 'He'll have hidden it well, and maybe even kept a backup transaction record. It's admissible if the original is lost and you can prove ownership.'

'Could he?' Cage asked. 'Would he have taken the trouble to set that up?'

Slavich just stared at her. 'Wouldn't you?' he asked.

'Considering...'

But the CEO was not listening. 'The President,' he murmured. 'Yes. There may be an opportunity here to kill two birds with one stone.' He

smiled. 'I'm speaking metaphorically, you understand.'

The queue moved slowly. The tall, heavy-set man who had sat alone in the third row of the excursion stood patiently in line with the other passengers. They had collected their luggage from the carousel, and were now waiting to pass through the security gate. He had chosen this queue based on the flick of a coin. The fact that it was moving far more slowly than either of the other queues did not concern him. That wasn't the point.

The hold-up appeared to be because of an argument between one of the passengers and the security guards. The passenger was trying to persuade the guards that the immobilisation spray in her luggage was purely for self-defence. The guards were as determined, if less noisy, in their opinion that it constituted a potential weapon and as such was prohibited. She was welcome to reclaim it when she left Vega, but no way was she taking it into the station.

The man watched the contretemps. He knew which way the argument would go. He had studied the security arrangements in detail before he left Battrul, just as he had determined that the least conspicuous way to enter Vega was from one of Caruso's tours of the buffer zone.

The argument ended, abruptly, with an offer from the guard chief to impound the woman as well as her luggage. The queue shuffled forward, passports and suitcases ready for inspection.

The man's passport was in the name of Kami! Solarin, though of course that was not his real name. He was getting to the point, he reflected, where he was not really sure what his real name was. Not that it mattered. Those who had heard of him at all knew him as Hazard . That was enough. His reputation was worth more than any nomenclature.

'Is this all you have, sir?' the guard asked.

Solarin nodded. 'I travel light.'

'Very wise. Hand luggage only, eh?'The guard hefted Solarin's two small cases on to the conveyer belt that fed through the scanner. A holdall and a wooden box with a metal handle screwed to its side.

'Careful with that one,' Solarin cautioned him, tapping on the box. 'A gift. For a friend.'

The box rolled slowly into the scanner. The belt stopped. After a few moments it started up again.

'Would you open this for me, sir?'

'Of course.' Solarin unlocked the box and swung the lid open, turning it round to show its contents to the guard. Inside, the box was padded with foam. Six small compartments had been carved out of the foam, and inside each nestled a heavy, cut-glass goblet.

Glass was a tricky material to work with. But, because the security guards knew that, together with the way it showed up on security scanners, it was ideal. Not that it would have been Solarin's first choice, but then he never made choices himself. He had decided on the goblets by using a random-number generator to determine the page of a catalogue from one of the larger Batttrulian department stores. A throw of the dice had then given him the item number - a set of six cut-glass goblets. Ideal.

'That's fine, sir,' the guard said, closing up the box. 'My apologies.'

'No problem.'

The guard smiled and shook his head. 'Scanning glass, especially crystal, is very difficult, you know,' he confided quietly. 'We have to check.'

'I understand.' Solarin locked the box and lifted it down from the belt.

'You won't believe the profile those gave us on the scanner.'

'Really?' Solarin wondered. But the guard was already turning to the next person in the queue, reaching for their luggage.

Solarin paused as he left the customs area, studying a large map of Vega that was painted on to the wall. The most direct route to the hotel? Off one of the side passages. He put down his holdall, and pushed a button on the side of his wristwatch. Digits flickered across its surface, and he waited for the random-number generator to settle on a result. Odd numbers for the direct route, an even number and he would start

narrowing the options for a roundabout path. Three hundred and seventeen. The direct route. Like the choice of glass as a material or his choice of route, everything Hazard Solarin did was entirely random - no pattern, no risk, no scope for prediction. It was what made Solarin the most professional, feared, efficient and expensive assassin in the business.

Chapter Two

Transparent Intentions

The receptionist was about to come off duty. She had been up most of the night, and was looking forward to a shower and some sleep. But, whatever she might feel behind her make-up, her smile was perfect as the man approached the desk.

He had little luggage, but even so it was apparent that he was a recent arrival. There had been several in the last hour, from one of Caruso's excursion trips. She expected a few more yet.

'A room, sir?'

'Please. A suite if you have one.' He set down a wooden case, more of a box really, on the desk, resting his hand on it. His holdall was at his feet and she could tell from his stance that his legs were braced round it. You got them like that - guests who seemed to worry that their luggage might get up and walk off on its own if they didn't keep some part of their anatomy attached to it.

She checked the database, trying to ignore the clicking sound coming from the man. Was that his tongue? It seemed to come from behind the box. Where his other hand was.

'Something on the sixth level if you have it.'

'I'll see what I can do, sir.'

'Thank you.'

She ran her finger down the options that appeared on the screen. 'Yes, sir. You're in luck. We have several.'

'How many.'

She looked up. 'Sorry, sir?'

'How many suites do you have on that level?' He was holding his hand up now, fingers clenched round something. Shaking it slightly.

She checked. 'Eleven.'

He nodded. And she could see now that he was holding a pair of dice. He rolled them on the desk behind his box. 'I'll take whichever is ninth down your list,' he said as he inspected the result.

'Of course, sir.' She marked the room as occupied in the database and kept her smile fixed. She needed that sleep.

Tullus Gath paused with her finger on the lighting control. She had cut the main ambient lights, and was about to turn off the spots that illuminated the paintings. It had taken two days to set up the exhibition, working pretty much solidly with short breaks for the odd meal and as little sleep as she could get away with. Now it was almost complete.

With the main lighting off, she could look back through the maze of exhibition stands and displays, see the splashes of light across the paintings stretching into the distance and round out of sight. The image was as surreal and bizarre as one of the Martinique paintings that formed it. A picture of pictures, images within images.

It was also a moment of pride. Gath had joined Martinique as his personal assistant when she was barely out of art college. She was besotted with his - then - unrecognised genius. To work for the great man had seemed the culmination of all her dreams. Until now. Now so much more was within her grasp. With the exhibition finally set up, almost ready to open... Her only regret at this moment was that Henri Blanc had not come with her, that he would for the moment see his exhibition only over the VR link.

The paintings were organised by theme and counter-theme rather than according to their period or age. The two nearest the door, within reach of where Gath stood, were from opposite ends of Martinique's working life. She could recall him painting the first - *On a Clear Day* - soon after she started working for him. Before they were lovers. She remembered how Blanc had called while he was working on it - the first time she and Blanc had met. The argument over funding, over Blanc's continued sponsorship despite all the setbacks and the harsh reviews. Despite the initial problems with the scannaliser.

The other painting in her plain sight was *Defying the Angel*. Again she could recall Martinique interviewing candidates for the image of the

Angel Yaladriell, setting up his equipment, calibrating every inch of the girl's form as he scanned her on to the canvas. Every inch.

Then, barely a year later, he was dead. And Defying the Angel had been one of the first of his works that Gath and Blanc had catalogued and shipped to Blanc's laboratories in Grenulva.

The two works formed an initial contrast at the start of the exhibition. On a Clear Day was at first sight a pleasant, pastoral scene. Woodland, clear sky, a narrow stream. Only on a closer examination did the viewer notice the figures lurking behind the trees, hiding in the undergrowth. The grotesque, misshapen creatures were barely visible, but, once seen, they altered one's perception of the painting - of all Martinique's work - for ever. The devils in the detail.

The later painting was far more blatant. The celestially beautiful angel, naked but for a diaphanous toga from which her magnificent wings protruded, cowered beneath the huge overbearing figure of the Devourer of Souls. The Devourer itself was a dark mass of hair and horns. The goat-like head leaned forward over the angel, the horns curled up and away from the skull. A long tongue dripped out of the oily jaw. Blood-red eyes were filled with angry, evil intent. But the arms that reached out towards the female figure were almost human, dark, muscular, but almost hairless. They contrasted with the shaggy legs that stretched down towards the bottom of the picture, and which ended in cloven hooves.

Tullus Gath reached out towards the painting. Her hand was a shadow over the canvas as it intervened between spotlight and picture. She ran her fingertips gently over the beautiful figure, caressing, stroking. The scan was perfect. She could feel the texture of the skin perfectly captured on the canvas; could perceive the change from the bare flesh of the upper arm to the matted hair of the creature's chest. She pressed her palm hard against the Devourer's breast, so hard she could feel a pulse in her hand that might almost have been the creature's own heart.

Then with a quiet sigh she turned out the lights.

The padded box was open on the bed. Solarin carefully lifted out the last of the crystal goblets and held it up to the light. He turned it slowly, looking for any imperfection, any visible join. There was none. It was a

perfect job. With a smile he carried the goblet across to the low coffee table by the sofa and placed it carefully beside the other five already there.

The basin in the bathroom was already filled with hot water - so hot it had steamed up the mirror above it. Solarin carried the first of the goblets through, and lowered it gently into the water, holding it for as long as he could stand the heat. Then he carefully let go, and pulled his dripping hand clear. He ran it under the cold tap of the bath, flexing his reddened fingers.

Carefully, almost lovingly, he repeated the process with each of the other goblets. Then he checked his watch, and went back into the bedroom. He picked up the copy of Your Personal Guide to the Facilities of Vega Station from the bedside cabinet and flicked idly through the pages. They were slightly thicker than ordinary paper, with a matt finish despite their glossy appearance. Liquid-crystal panels, Solarin realised. It made sense: that way the information in the book could be updated immediately, the changes sent by radio frequency or carrier wave to each copy.

As if to confirm his supposition, he noticed that one of the entries in the list of exhibitions was adorned with a flashing blue border.

THE MARTINIQUE EXPERIENCE

AN EXHIBITION OF THE WORK OF TOULOUR MARTINIQUE

FIRST EVER PUBLIC DISPLAY OF THE HENRI BLANC COLLECTION

THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE COLLECTION OF MARTINIQUE'S
WORK IN EXISTENCE

OPENING SOON ON VEGA STATION - WATCH THIS SPACE FOR
DETAILS

Solarin read quickly through the text, then looked at his watch again. He snapped the book shut, and went back to the bathroom. He pressed the lever to lift the plug from the basin, and watched the water drain away. The goblets were nestling in the basin, steaming in the heat from the water.

Solarin took a towel from the rack beside the bath and carried it through

to the bedroom. He unfolded it, then folded it double again before spreading it over the top of the coffee table.

Slowly, and with the utmost care, Solarin lifted out one of the goblets, holding it by stem and bowl. He carried it through to the table and laid it on the towel. A few minutes later he had all six goblets carefully arranged before him. Then he set about dismanning them, gently pulling the stems from the bowls, the bases from the stems - they came apart easily now that the adhesive had been dissolved by the hot water. Before long the table was covered with an assortment of glass components.

With a final check that he had all the pieces arranged as he wanted, Hazard Solarin started to reassemble the glass into new shapes.

The shop was dimly lit and dusty. Bric-a-brac stood piled alongside the genuine antiques, precariously balanced beside the wide pathways that crisscrossed the maze of odds and ends, junk and treasure. What little light there was streamed in from the corridor outside, peering cautiously through the grimy windows as if embarrassed by the state of things inside.

Ambrose Forster pushed his way along the main path to the private area at the back of the shop. The paths were kept wide and clear to enable his wheelchair to pass through, but the concession was as narrow as possible. The less space for the wheelchair, the more for the accumulated bits and pieces. The more to sell. So Forster's progress was slow and accompanied by curses and complaints as he collided with this pile, or side-swiped that one.

Newark Rappare followed close behind Forster. He picked up the things that Forster had dislodged, replacing them carefully in their accustomed places and knocking down other items in his turn.

'We should get the lights sorted out,' Forster grumbled as he glanced off a heavy leather-bound book, knocking it aside.

'And allow the customers actually to see what they're buying?' Rappare asked. 'Very unwise, in my opinion. Very unwise.'

Forster grunted noncommittally as he reached the end of the pathway

and emerged into the open area in front of the door to the area where Rappare's studio was situated. The lighting worked all right in there, of course. 'What about this Martinique exhibition?'

Rappare opened the door for Forster and stood aside to let him wheel through. 'A definite opportunity,' he said. 'I think we can interest them in something really rather special.'

'Lucrative?' Forster demanded. He handled the business side of things whereas Rappare was concerned primarily with the artistic, with the antiques and wares.

'Oh very lucrative, I should say.' Rappare was rubbing his hands together in anticipation of the deal. 'Martinique is so sought after these days. And Blanc has almost every extant picture of his now. I can only begin to imagine what he might offer for a previously unknown work.' He paused long enough to remove his hat and place it carefully on a relatively clear surface. 'Could be our biggest opportunity yet. Quite a coup.'

Forster nodded. 'A bit of luck then, this exhibition coming here. Now.'

'Indeed.' Rappare was searching through an old wooden filing cabinet. He emerged from its innards holding a dusty bottle and two small, grubby tumblers. 'It's so surprising,' he said, 'what treasures we have buried in amongst our collection of the rare and valuable.'

Cage was exactly halfway along the seldom-used passageway between the hotel foyer and the casino. She stopped opposite a recessed alcove, and checked carefully in both directions to see that the corridor was empty. Satisfied that she was indeed the only person using it, Vega's head of security pressed gently against one of the wooden panels on the wall opposite the alcove. The sensors built into the cavity behind checked her palmprint and drew in a sample of air from immediately round the panel in order to check her pheromones.

The process took almost no time at all, and a moment later the door concealed in the corridor wall clicked gently open. Cage looked round once again, then stepped quietly through the door, pulling it gently shut behind her.

Fitz had found that sitting at the casino bar was a way of staying virtually invisible. Life seemed to go on around him without pausing to acknowledge his existence. And that was fine, for now. Sam was obviously bored, and he was surprised she had not yet given up on the casino and wandered off to find out what else was going on. The Doctor seemed to be in his element, and was winning steadily if rather modestly at the backgammon table.

But it was Sam that Fitz was really concerned about. The Doctor hardly seemed to notice that he was not participating at the gaming tables. But Sam kept glancing across at him. She had joined him for a drink, but they both got fed up - Fitz with her questions about why he wasn't playing, Sam with Fitz's short, sharp replies.

It didn't help matters that he was dying for a smoke, In his jacket pocket he could feel the packet of Camels. The last packet of Camels. And it wasn't full. It had not taken him long to determine that the TARDIS did not contain a cigarette machine, and nor was the Doctor or Sam likely to suggest they whiz off and hunt one down. Which left him sitting at the bar of a casino where he had little idea what was going on and knew nobody, with no money for gaming and eighteen cigarettes between him and quitting and no sign of an ashtray. Thank God he could charge drinks to his hotel room.

At a nearby table, the casino manager, Harris Stabilo, was having a word with one of the guests. An old man with white hair and a bristling moustache had beckoned Stabilo over and was giving him grief about the speed of service. Fitz watched Stabilo as he cringed, his hands working nervously at his sides.

'What sort of establishment are you running here, Stabilo?' the old man was demanding. 'I order a drink, I expect it to arrive before the ice has melted, eh?'

'I'm sure, sir,' Stabilo stammered. 'An aberration, I do assure you. Not at all usual, you have my word.' His head bobbed unctuously giving Fitz a full view of his greasy pate.

'Won't happen again, eh?' The man gave a snort of satisfaction. 'Delighted to hear it.'

Fitz watched as the apologies and complaints continued. He could spend all day watching Stabilo. The man seemed to have an unending repertoire of obsequious replies and affected mannerisms. Just watching the lace trim on his cuffs was enough to make the unwary traveller seasick.

Oh what the hell, Fitz thought. He pulled the packet from one pocket while reaching for the matches in the other. The satisfying sound of the match head grinding against the sandpaper strip on the box of Swan Vestas brought a smile to his lips as they clamped round the end of the cigarette. Stabilo glanced in Fitz's direction, presumably intrigued by the sound, and Fitz gave him his most nonchalant eyebrow-raise. Simon Templar, watch out. He cupped his hand round the match as he lit the ciggy, and blew out a satisfying stream of smoke. Through it, he could see Sam frowning across the room at him before looking pointedly away.

Behind him, the barman coughed politely. 'Sorry,' Fitz muttered, and drew a last long drag on the ciggy before stubbing it out in his empty glass. The cigarette fizzled pathetically for a moment, then died. A thin line of smoke curled up from the glass.

The last piece fitted into place as easily as all the others. Solarin held the finished artefact, turning it over in his hand to admire the workmanship. It was a long dagger. The blade had been the middle of the stem of one of the goblets, the hilt was another stem. The round, concave base of a goblet formed a hand-guard and joined the blade to the hilt.

Satisfied, Solarin laid the dagger down alongside his other equipment. All of it was made of glass, fashioned from the dismantled goblets. There was another, smaller, knife and a picklock. Beside these were a set of ampoules made of thin glass that could be broken by the deliberate pressure of thumb and forefinger to release the clear poison or acid inside (a slight indentation warned which contained which).

And most intricate of all was a small handgun. A crystal pistol, Solarin thought ruefully. The percussion system and the six bullets, like everything else, were made of toughened glass. Some considerable skill was involved in pulling the trigger exactly hard enough for the crude fulcrum mechanism to bring the hammer down on the ampoule containing the clear liquid charge. Hard enough to break the glass, not

so hard as to shatter the mechanism itself. With the impact, the liquid would ignite, and the resulting explosion force the sharpened glass bullet through the barrel that had once been the stem of a goblet, hollowed out to allow for the knife blade that had fitted inside.

Solarin surveyed his work and decided it was time for some relaxation. Should he try out the hotel restaurant, or perhaps look round the casino? Or maybe room service would suffice for now... The dice clicked in his hand as he rattled them together. Then he threw them expertly on to the table so that they landed in an area clear of glassware. Five and four - the restaurant. But first he had better put away his toys. Solarin opened the padded box that had held the goblets, and pulled out sections of the foam padding. Soon the foam was revealed to be cut into very different shapes, shapes that matched those of the glass objects now arranged on the low table.

Stabilo's office was a safe haven, a place to hide from the stresses and excesses of his casino and the hotel. Managing both was hard work, and he knew full well that he was not really cut out for it. His office, hidden away in an otherwise unused corner of the casino building, was a quiet place where he could escape and gather his thoughts. He was not really given to meditation as such, but he did value the clarity of thought that comes only with peace and quiet. After his run-in earlier in the evening with Antherzon - the most recent of many - he was ready for little of both.

He was not to get it.

The first clue that something was amiss was the fact that the lights were off. They were operated by a movement sensor, which meant they should have come on when he opened the door. The door that should have been locked.

Stabilo had alerted maintenance already to the fact that the sensor was not as sensitive as he believed it should be, and consequently turned the lights out at inconvenient moments when he was sitting too still. But he had merely to wave his hand above his head (usually while muttering his own magic incantation) for the sensor to turn them back on again.

All of which meant that, even if Stabilo's entrance was not enough movement to alert the system to his presence, the blow that knocked him across the room should have been more than adequate.

But these thoughts were not uppermost in his mind as the massive hairy paw connected with the side of his head. Nor did he pay them much heed as he bounced off his desk and landed on his back on the floor. It was not until after the shaggy figure that towered dimly above him had slammed shut the drawer of the filing cabinet it had been rifling and lumbered out of the room that Stabilo realised how dark everything was. And by then it was getting darker, and cloudier, until the darkness was all there was left.

Chapter Three

Contractual Obligation

The opera was an experience, to say the least. Sam had never been to the opera before. Her parents had both been keen on it, which meant in turn that Sam had no interest whatsoever. In fact, if such a thing were possible, she had a negative interest. But she doubted that the refinement of Covent Garden would bear much relation to the opera presented on Vega.

The Doctor had surfaced that afternoon - from a game of cards that he claimed had some similarity to blackjack - for long enough to join Sam for a drink of ginger beer.

'You're not really getting into the spirit of all this, are you?' he'd asked her quietly, as if it were a secret he had just discovered. Sam glared at him. 'You don't have to stay here all the time, you know. Get out a bit. See the sights.'

'What sights?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'I don't know, really.' He frowned. 'Maybe I need to get out a bit too.' He considered a moment before cracking a wide grin. 'Maybe we all do.'

'What had you in mind?' Sam asked. She tried not to seem too interested. But from the Doctor's pursed lips and overly offhand sip of ginger beer she guessed she hadn't succeeded. "There's some painting exhibition people keep recommending,' Sam suggested.

The Doctor frowned. 'Paintings? Oh no.' He seemed scandalised by the notion. 'No, no, no. Paintings you can get anywhere.' He raised his glass to the light and seemed to be admiring the way the bubbles rose in it. 'Opera,' he said grandly. "That's the thing.'

'Just one Cornetto?' Sam asked in surprise.

'What?' He looked at her round the glass. 'No, thanks,' he said at last. 'This will do me fine.'

Fitz had been as dubious as Sam. But he too seemed keen to escape from the casino for an evening.

'When are you going to start actually winning anything?' Sam asked as they followed the Doctor across a large open foyer towards the opera house. 'Or playing, come to that?'

'Tactics,' Fitz said quietly.

'Tactics?'

'Shh. Yeah, tactics. I'm hoping the Doctor will lose big time, and my initial stake will be enough to win it for me.'

Sam stared him straight in the eye. 'You don't know the rules of any of the games, do you?' Fitz's reply was a spluttered bluster of noncommittal sound. 'No you don't,' Sam told him. 'I've seen you watching, trying to get the hang of it.' She grinned. 'If it's any consolation, I've no idea either. And it's no use watching the guy in the wheelchair and his fat friend,' she added as they reached what seemed to be a ticket booth, 'because they cheat, you know.'

'Oh,' said Fitz, almost managing to hide his surprise. 'You'd noticed that, then?'

The Doctor meanwhile was arguing with a large woman who seemed to have been surgically inserted into the booth. She was confident that the 'gentleman and his friends' had come to the wrong place, while the Doctor was equally certain that, yes, he knew this was for the opera and, yes, he did want to attend, thank you. And so did his friends.

The argument lasted for some while, until the woman eventually gave up and handed the Doctor three tickets. 'Tourists,' she muttered darkly as they moved away.

'I assume,' Fitz said as they made their way up a dimly lit staircase towards the box the Doctor had reserved, 'that the nice lady will be singing the closing aria.'

'Yes,' the Doctor chuckled. 'she was a little on the large side.'

'Grow up, boys,' Sam hissed as they reached the top of the stairs. 'It's probably not her fault.'

It was not until they were seated in their box, overlooking the vast opera

house, that Sam began to get an idea of what the confusion might have been. Fitz could see it too, that much was evident from his expression.

'Er-'he said. 'Er...'

The Doctor, however, seemed oblivious. 'Mmm? What is it?'

'We're the only people here,' Sam pointed out.

'Oh nonsense.' The Doctor waved an expansive hand towards the rows of seats in the auditorium below. "The place is nearly half full.'

'I think you missed the point,' Fitz said. 'What Sam said is that we are the only people here.'

'Oh. 'The Doctor replied at last. 'Oh. I see.' He stroked his chin thoughtfully for a moment. 'Yes. Perhaps I should have realised.'

The opera was not terribly well attended. The auditorium was indeed about half full, though the boxes high above were almost all occupied. And it seemed to Sam as she looked round that every pair of eyes was fixed on her, the Doctor and Fitz. Across the huge room, massive shaggy heads turned slowly and gleaming red eyes looked up at their box. Tall, hairy figures in the boxes opposite leaned so far across the divide it seemed they must be about to overbalance and topple out. There were dozens of them, dozens of giant wolflike creatures with long claws and bloodshot eyes staring up at the Doctor, Sam and Fitz. She shuddered, reminded immediately of Kursaal, years ago, and the werewolf-like Jax. And deeper, somewhere within, there was another thought, a memory trying to break loose.

'Maybe,' said Fitz quietly, breaking into Sam's thoughts, 'that nice lady with the tickets had a point.'

'Canvine,' the Doctor responded.

'You what?'

'They're Canvine. I'd forgotten how much they enjoy the opera. Probably it's only on for their benefit.' He leaned forward in his chair, so that his face was suddenly full in the light of an overhead spot. Then he grinned, and gave a gentle, almost royal, wave to the watching masses.

Sam closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. Perhaps when she opened her eyes it would all be all right, she would be somewhere else, or the wolves would have gone. She opened them again, to find that, despite her wish, she wasn't. And they hadn't.

'They're quite friendly,' the Doctor was saying, still smiling down at the auditorium. 'No trouble at all really. Well; he added as an apparent afterthought, 'not since the war, anyway.'

'War?' Fitz asked anxiously. 'What war?'

'Oh that was a while back. I think.' The Doctor's smile froze. 'Assuming we've had it yet,' he added. 'I wish the TARDIS had brought us back here when I asked her to. She's becoming altogether too temperamental these days.' He pronounced it as tempora-mental, but neither Sam nor Fitz returned his knowing smile.

'Oh great,' Sam said quietly. 'We're about to go to war with a pack of slavering wolfmen, but first we'll gatecrash their gang show. Good move.'

The Doctor had pulled out his fob watch and flicked open the lid. 'No, we're all right,' he reassured them. 'The war was over long ago.'

'Who won?' Fitz asked.

'Oh, nobody; the Doctor said. 'Most wars are like that, you know. The Canvine and the Battrulians live in their own sectors and keep generally distant. There's a buffer zone between the systems, and this place - Vega - is the only point at which they ever meet.'

'A buffer zone,' Sam repeated. 'Terrific. Let's hope we haven't just crossed it.'

Their conversation had been conducted almost entirely in hisses and whispers. But now the Doctor yawned, stretched, and said in a volume so normal is sounded uncomfortably loud, 'I didn't get a programme.'

Before either Fitz or Sam could sympathise, a deep voice growled, 'You're welcome to borrow mine.'

Sam gave a little shriek of nervous surprise, managing to turn it into an approximation of a cough at the last moment. One of the Canvine was leaning across from the next box, having heard the Doctor's complaint.

He was holding a small booklet in his huge, matted paw.

'Oh, thank you, sir.' The Doctor took the programme with a smile.

'We don't get many humans here,' the Canvine said. 'Please forgive the stares. They are not meant to be intimidating.'

'Glad to hear it,' Sam said.

'I find it ironic,' the hairy figure went on, 'that the one artistic contribution that humans have made to galactic culture is so neglected by them. There was a time when humans and Canvines would both attend these performances, but I think the withdrawal of the subsidies rather put an end to that.' He shook his shaggy head. 'Such a shame that it is so expensive these days.'

Fitz was peering at the Canvine, who still leaned across the balcony of the adjacent theatre box. 'Excuse me,' he asked pointing to a small bowl the Canvine clutched in his other paw. 'Fj-, is that raw meat, if you don't mind me asking?'

Sam leaned forward to get a better view of the contents of the bowl. She wished she hadn't.

The Canvine was nodding ponderously. 'Would you like some?' he asked Fitz, thrusting the bowl towards him.

'Christ, no,' Fitz replied quickly. 'No thank you. I was just interested.' He turned towards Sam, and she glared at him. He caught her expression before he could suggest his friend might be interested and said nothing.

'Oh well,' the Canvine said as the Doctor handed him back the programme, 'if you change your mind, you can get some at the interval.' As he spoke, the lights began to dim and there was a general rumble of satisfaction and the usual noises of an audience settling down to enjoy the performance.

It was something of a relief that the performers were human. Sam had been worried about how much she was going to enjoy the show anyway. The realisation that it might be performed and sung by giant upright wolves had not calmed her fears. In the event, however, it was merely loud and boring, and not actually absurd or silly. Or at least no more than she expected from opera.

During the interval, the Canvine who had spoken to them before leaned over the balcony again and asked them how they were enjoying it. His name, he told them, was Palladio. He was on a two-week vacation on Vega and was looking forward to returning home the next day, as were almost all the other Canvines on Vega, he thought. He found humans, he confessed, rather insular and boring on the whole.

'I haven't seen any Canvines at the casino, I don't believe,' the Doctor said.

Palladio nodded. 'Not great gamblers. We don't socialise much with the humans. Not any more, anyway.' He paused, then added, 'Usually.'

'Do any Canvines live here on Vega?' Sam asked.

'Only Caruso.' Palladio pointed out an especially large and savage-looking figure in a box on the other side of the opera house. "They say he's gone native. Runs a tour company taking humans to look at Canvine across the buffer zone, and Canvines to look at Battrul. He's been based here for longer than anyone can remember. I believe he's just returned from a trip, so you may see him at the casino soon. He enjoys a beer and a bag of scratchings as much as the next Canvine.' Palladio grinned suddenly, his jaw opening just enough to let a string of viscous saliva run down from his yellowed teeth. It stretched to its limit, then detached itself and fell to the auditorium below.

Sam turned away, partly to hide her expression, and partly to look again at Caruso. He really was enormous. The massive hairy creature turned slightly as she watched, seeming for a moment to return her gaze.

Behind her, Sam could hear Palladio's gruff tones as he said, 'The humans here call him "Bigdog."'

'Really?' the Doctor said.

'Imaginative,' Fitz muttered.

'Bigdog' Caruso applauded as loudly as anyone, although he did not think this had been one of the better interpretations he had seen of Return of the Prodigal . But he had to set an example, and he

appreciated that for many this would be their only opportunity to see live opera performed, as it should be, by humans.

Bigdog was just turning to go, remarking to his guests how much he had enjoyed himself, when a voice cut across his comments. A human voice. He glanced at once across at the box where the humans in the audience had been seated. Sure enough, they were still there. He could not remember when humans had last attended the opera. They had seemed suitably deferential to the Canvines, and to have enjoyed the show. Perhaps it was a good sign, a portent of how things would soon become. If all went according to plan.

But the voice was not from across the opera house. It had come from behind him. And, when the shout came again, he recognised it.

'Stay right there, Bigdog. I said I want a word with you.'

He turned. 'Miss Cage. How pleasant. Do you enjoy the opera?'

The Vega head of security pushed through the Canvines who were filing slowly out of the box. She was dwarfed by their tall figures, but that seemed not to worry her - though her hand was never far from the pistol at her belt, Bigdog noticed.

'You know I wasn't here for the opera,' she said more quietly as she approached.

'A pity. You missed a rare treat.'

'Oh, really?'

The box was empty now apart from the two of them. 'No,' Bigdog said quietly. 'Not really. What can I do for you?'

Cage regarded him closely. 'You don't know why I'm here?'

Bigdog spread his hairy palms and did his best to look innocent. 'You have me at a disadvantage.'

Cage's head was leaning to one side slightly. Was she thinking about this, or did human heads sometimes get heavier on one side? Even after all these years living among them, Bigdog was unsure of so many things about the strange race. 'I wondered,' Cage said slowly, 'whether you

perhaps had Mr Stabilo at a disadvantage earlier this evening. You or one of your friends'

'I fear that in my experience Mr Stabilo is usually at a disadvantage.'

Cage was not amused. 'Not usually robbed and beaten up, though.'

Bigdog's eyes narrowed. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that someone attacked Stabilo in his office. Someone large and hairy.'

'And you think it was a Canvine.' It was not a question.

Cage raised an eyebrow. 'It seems like a reasonable conclusion. From the description.'

Bigdog snorted. 'Perhaps,' he admitted. 'But why come to me?'

'Because you live here. Because I can talk to you.' Cage stared up at him, held his gaze as she said, 'Because, for reasons we both know, the most likely suspect is you.'

'But I was here at the opera,' Bigdog said, keeping his tone reasonable.

Cage nodded slowly. 'So you know when the attack took place, then.'

'Don't play games,' the Canvine snarled, his voice suddenly guttural and harsh.

Cage showed no reaction. 'Actually,' she said, 'Stabilo was attacked before the opera started. But perhaps you knew that already. Can I ask what you did before you came here tonight?'

Bigdog's jaws parted enough for a string of saliva to escape from between two of his large, sharp front teeth. 'I was getting dressed.' He waited a moment as Cage's glance flicked quickly over his body, taking in the loose trousers and sleeveless tunic that Bigdog wore. 'It takes a while,' Bigdog added. He held up his huge paws, curling the long fat fingers and extending his claws, making them seem clumsy and awkward. 'All those difficult buttons. You know.'

The sound of the ball running round a roulette wheel is the same the universe over, the Doctor reflected. But what was different was the bias in each wheel. No matter how perfect the mechanism, how balanced the spindle, there was always a slight bias. He had been watching the roulette wheel all morning, occasionally placing a small bet and humming various tunes from the previous night's opera.

In his head, he was keeping track of every spin of the wheel. The Doctor had a mental table of the result - how long the wheel had spun, how often the ball had jumped or not run true on each spin. A hundred and seventy-four spins. He'd give it to two hundred and then do some simple mental calculations on his observations. If nothing else he would get an idea of whether to put his money on red or black.

'You're very careful with your money, I see.'

The voice broke into the Doctor's reverie. 'I look after the pennies,' he answered absently.

'Wise, but boring. You won't win much that way.'

The Doctor smiled and turned. 'I won't lose much, either,' he said. And frowned. For a moment he thought there was nobody there, but then he realised his mistake. Embarrassed, he looked down at the man in the wheelchair. 'Hello there. I'm the Doctor.' He grinned and extended his hand.

'Ambrose Forster.' The man took his hand and shook it. 'Don't let me keep you from your game.'

The Doctor withdrew his hand and stared at the gaming chip that now nestled in his palm. 'Oh no problem. I always have time for a natter.'

Forster nodded. 'Well perhaps you could place that on number seventeen for me.' He smiled. 'I have trouble reaching.'

The Doctor glanced at the chip as he placed it. The chip itself was a simple white disc. It had no markings, but he knew it contained a mechanism that was keyed to Forster, and only Forster could reassign it to someone else. It also kept track of how much Forster had won on that chip so far. To get the money, all he would have to do was reassign the chip to the bank and the funds would be transferred to his account. The

chip slotted into a niche on the roulette table in the seventeen square. Beside it a tiny display lit up showing the chip's current value. The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

'Are you sure -' he started to ask the man in the wheelchair.

But Forster waved a hand, cutting him short. 'Easy come,' he said as the wheel began to spin.

The Doctor watched the ball's noisy progress round the wheel, adding his observations to the others he had already made. Nine, red.

'Easy go,' Forster said as the noise of the ball stopped. 'Did I win?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I'm sorry.'

Forster shrugged. "Thank you anyway." He was already turning his chair, facing towards the bar, where a short but bulky man wearing a short cape and holding a cane was waiting for him. The Doctor had seen them playing cards together several times. He gave a half-hearted wave to the back of Forster's wheelchair.

'Don't worry.' The voice was quiet, both silky and slightly husky at the same time. 'He can afford it.'

The Doctor turned, wondering vaguely why people kept talking to his back. Was it somehow more attractive than his front? How would he tell? 'A nice man,' he said noncommittally.

The woman smiled. 'A rich man,' she said.

'I suppose so.' The Doctor recognised the woman. Her red hair would be distinctive enough even without the make-up on her face, the high heels on her shoes and the hint of a dress somewhere in between. 'You're Sam's friend.'

'We've spoken.' The woman was almost smiling at him, a slight upward turn of the mouth, something in the eyes. 'You're the Doctor,' she said. 'I'm Vermilion.'

They watched the roulette wheel spin again. 'I'm not rich,' the Doctor said as his number failed - again - to come up. 'And you like rich people, don't you?'

'It's my job to like rich people.'

'So why are you talking to me, and not to Mr Forster?'

She smiled, a full smile this time rather than the knowing curl of the mouth. 'He's impervious to my charms. And anyway, he practically lives here. He doesn't need encouraging to spend more money.'

'You only answered half my question,' the Doctor pointed out.

'Half more than I had to.'

He nodded. 'True.' Across the room, Forster and the fat man were settling into a game of cards. 'Did he make his fortune at the card table?' The Doctor asked.

Vermilion shook her head. 'Hardly. Though he and Rappare do all right at cards.'

Neither of them commented as a card seemed to disappear into the innards of Forster's wheelchair as he dealt.

'It was really by chance, though, that they made most of their initial money.'

'Oh?' the Doctor asked.

'Buy me a drink and I'll tell you about it.'

The Doctor grinned. 'Tell me about it and I'll buy you a drink.'

She cocked her head to one side. 'OK,' she said after a moment. And, as if by magic, a waiter was standing beside her ready to take the order.

Fitz joined them at the table as they sat down. 'Given up on the roulette?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Just taking a short break.' He could continue his calculations later, he had decided. The samples he was recording in his head did not have to be contiguous for the calculations to be valid. Probably. Maybe he should test that too... 'Where's Sam?' he asked.

'Oh, around. I think she said something about finding a gym.' He was staring at Vermilion as he spoke. 'Aren't you going to introduce me?'

A waiter arrived with champagne and ginger beer as the Doctor made the introductions. 'Vermilion is going to tell us a story,' he explained to Fitz.

'Oh good.' He was still staring at her. 'I love a story.'

Vermilion was looking curiously back at Fitz. 'Why are you dressed so oddly?' she asked.

The Doctor tried to hide his grin. He could feel himself failing as Fitz gaped and looked down at his dinner jacket. He was wearing a red carnation in the buttonhole, and a black silk bow tie at the neck of his wing-collared white shirt.

'You were about to tell us about your friends Messrs Forster and Rappare,' the Doctor said quietly before Fitz had recovered enough to answer.

Vermilion shrugged. 'Oh, there's not much to tell, really. They've been here for ever. Longer than I have, anyway. They run an antiques business down on Level Two.'

The Doctor turned to look at the two with renewed interest and a hint of admiration. 'I must visit their establishment,' he said.

'I wouldn't bother. It's dim and dusty. But they do all right by it.'

'Is that how they make their money?' Fitz asked.

'I guess they make something from it. The stuff they sell is expensive enough. They also win quite a lot at cards.'

'I'd noticed,' Fitz said. 'Did you know they -'

'Please,' the Doctor cut in, 'let her tell us.'

'Sorry.'

'They had some luck a while back,' Vermilion explained. 'No, not here,' she said as Fitz started to speak. She took a sip of her champagne.

'There was an exhibition of postage stamps. You know, sticky bits of paper that people used to put-'

'We know,' the Doctor said gently. 'Do go on.'

Vermilion shrugged. 'We have a lot of exhibitions here.' She sipped at her drink. 'It helps to justify our existence to the powers that be back on Battrul. They're happier to turn a blind eye to the gambling and duty-free if they can convince themselves it's for our cultural enrichment.' She paused. 'That used to be it, anyway. Probably all change now that the last lot's out and Drexler's taken over.' She paused for another sip of champagne.

'That's expensive stuff, you know,' Fitz whispered to the Doctor. 'I'm surprised you let her charge it to your room.'

'I didn't,' the Doctor told him straight-faced.

'Oh?'

'No. I let her charge it to yours.' He turned back to Vermilion before Fitz could reply. 'You were saying, about the stamp exhibition.'

'Well, there was an accident. A fire. Very sad. Almost the whole lot went up in smoke.'

'And it was Forster and Rappare's exhibition?' The Doctor asked. 'Cleaned up on the insurance, did they?'

'No. It was nothing to do with them, actually. But they just happened to have in their shop a rare postage stamp. A Leviathan Red, I think. Would that be right?'

'Maybe.'

'Whatever. Anyway, the fire destroyed one of the largest collections of rare stamps in existence, including several of these red ones.'

Fitz was not following. 'So how did that help them?'

The Doctor could guess what had happened though. 'I imagine it drove up the value of the stamp that they owned quite considerably.'

Vermilion nodded. 'The exhibition owner bought it from them with the insurance money. He was desperate to replace the stamps he'd lost from his collection. Apparently they made an absolute killing.'

'That was a bit of luck,' the Doctor mused.

'I don't believe in luck,' Fitz retorted darkly, leaning back in his chair so that his eyes were in shadow.

'Really? What an odd thing to say,' the Doctor replied. 'Especially while you're in a casino.'

Over Fitz's shoulder, visible clearly now as he leaned back, the Doctor could see the main doorway through from the Vega Hotel. And he could see Bigdog making his way across the room towards the bar.

Fitz turned to see what the Doctor was looking at. 'The one they call Bigdog,' he murmured. 'Why is that, do you suppose?'

Vermilion too had seen the Canvine enter the casino. She drained the last of her champagne and pushed back her chair as she stood up. 'Please excuse me,' she said. The hesitation before she added 'gentlemen' was barely discernible. 'There's someone I need to talk to.' She flashed a smile at the Doctor. 'It's been fun.'

The Doctor was already on his feet, shaking her hand gently. 'My pleasure.'

'You leaving so soon?' Fitz asked. 'Just as we were getting to know one another.'

'Don't worry,' Vermilion told him as she turned away from the table. 'I have a few friends who are just dying to meet you.'

Fitz and the Doctor watched Vermilion as she swayed slowly over towards the bar. On the way she paused to speak with a group of young women. They were huddled together giggling into their drinks. After a few words, they all turned together to look at the Doctor and Fitz. Then, as Vermilion continued to the bar, they made their way over towards the table.

The Doctor was still standing, and he saw no reason to sit down again. Quite the contrary. So he murmured, 'I think I had better get back to see

how the roulette is going.' Fitz was not looking at him as he spoke, and gave no indication that he had heard. The Doctor paused just long enough to decide that this might be no bad thing. By the time the girls were within range of the table, and Fitz turned towards the empty chair beside him, his mouth open, the Doctor was long gone.

'Calmer now?'Vermilion asked Bigdog.

He grunted, and accepted his drink from the barman. 'I don't know what's got into Cage.'

Vermilion shrugged. 'Someone attacked Stabilo. They're worried. End of civilisation as we know it, and all that. We don't have trouble on Vega - no guns, no weapons, no crime.'

Bigdog grunted again. 'Except for what happens in this place,' he growled. 'How's business?'

The soft carpeting was a relief after the hard floor of the gym. Sam could feel the perspiration dripping down the back of her neck despite the towel she held round it. She had decided not to use the changing rooms at the gym but to return to her hotel room. It wasn't far, and she didn't mind being seen in her trainers, shorts and T-shirt. At least, not on the way to the gym. On the way back now, hair sodden and her reddened face, legs and arms glistening, she wasn't so sure. She paused and wiped the towel over her face again.

The corridor was very slightly curved, which meant it was difficult to tell quite how far along it she was. The gym was on Level One, and she had taken the elevator straight down from the hotel on the way. On the way back she had climbed the stairs to Level Two. The corridor was much the same, but the small shops and offices that were situated off it varied. Most of them were open and seemed to be doing a steady trade. Sam nodded to the people who glanced at her as they passed. A few said hello, but most seemed not to notice her.

She realised she had paused outside a particularly dusty window. A door next to the window led into the shop beyond. It was closed. Sam peered through the window, but she could see very little inside. She rubbed at

the glass with her towel, but succeeded only in leaving a smeary mess. A sign above the door was her only clue as to what lay within. It was in faded, olde-worlde lettering and said, FORSTER-RAPPARE - ANTIQUES AND CURIOS.

'So this is where Laurel and Hardy hang out,' Sam murmured. She set off jogging slowly down the corridor. 'Business could be better, I guess.'

Fitz leaned forward, his eyes flicking from side to side as if he was checking he could not be overheard. 'There is a story,' he said in a stage whisper, 'that Bigdog came in here last week for a drink.' He paused and glanced round again. He couldn't see Bigdog now - perhaps the huge hairy creature had wandered off again. The faces of the small group now gathered closely round the table were rapt with interest. A couple more people had paused to listen, leaning forward eagerly.

Fitz sipped at his martini, and continued: 'Bigdog went up to the bar, and banged on the top for service.'

Someone else had arrived behind him. Fitz smiled, the bigger the audience the better. He was finally making some impact here, getting some attention. Certainly the expressions of the people closest to him were set into masks of interest. Several of them were staring at him hard, obviously willing him to continue.

'When the barman finally came over, Bigdog said to him, 'I'll have a pint of beer please. Oh and a..."' Fitz stopped, drawing out the moment. Nobody breathed, it seemed, as they waited for him to go on. "...And a packet of crisps, please," he eventually finished. Now for the punchline. Fitz was grinning already. 'And the barman said -' He glanced back at the figure behind him as he spoke.

And froze.

It was Bigdog. He was holding what looked suspiciously like a pint of beer in one huge hairy hand, a packet of what might well be crisps in the other. When he spoke his voice was a guttural snarl. A string of saliva dripped from the corner of his mouth, his sharp teeth glinting behind.

'Why the big pause?' Bigdog asked.

Fitz gulped. 'Oh,' he said as soon as his voice was working again, 'so you've heard it before then.'

They met in Cage's office. It was less conspicuous than the Vega Central Bank, and the CEO and Cage had every reason to be there. The main topic for discussion was the break-in at the casino the previous night.

'There are implications,' the CEO said darkly.

Cage nodded grimly.

Slavich looked blank. 'Oh?' he offered. 'Such as?'

'Such as the financial files for the casino,' Cage said. 'Including debtors, creditors, that sort of thing.'

Slavich breathed out heavily. 'Stolen?'

'Compromised,' the CEO said. 'We have to assume that at least the intruder may have seen them.'

'And do we know who the intruder was?'

'We are pursuing several lines of inquiry,' Cage said.

'You mean "no".'

'I mean that probably we do.'

'But we need to be sure,' the CEO told her. 'This situation must be resolved as soon as possible. We've got enough on our plate already.'

'Are we any closer to solving our other problem?' Slavich asked.

'Soon,' the CEO told him. 'Everything is in place. It just takes a call to the right hotel room.'

OK, so it was cheating. But Sam reckoned she deserved a break. So

she had spurned the emergency stairs and taken the elevator up to Level Five. It wasn't as though she hadn't already worked out for over an hour after all.

The elevator opened on to an open mezzanine area on the fifth level. The Vega Hotel was beyond the area, along a short corridor. The area itself served as the foyer and queuing area for several galleries and exhibition halls. It was empty at the moment, all but one of the exhibition areas closed off, the doors locked. The outer edge of the open area was bounded by a brass railing. Beyond it was a sheer drop right down to Level One. The elevator, Sam could see, ran up the inside of the opening. She could see other lifts rising and falling all round the huge central well. At the bottom, there was a cafe area set in an island surrounded by shallow water and reached by short, narrow bridges. Several tiny people were having miniature morning coffee.

Sam looked up, and immediately felt dizzy. The roof was a long way away. It seemed to be painted black, with tiny lights set into it like stars. It took Sam a moment to realise that they were stars. The roof was glass, and the blackness beyond was space.

The sound was like a pistol shot, echoing round the area. Sam turned quickly, the cathedral dizziness returning for a moment so that her vision swam.

A woman was standing beside the door that had slammed shut behind her, locking it. She was tall and slim, dressed in a smart one-piece grey suit. Her short hair was also grey, but with streaks of auburn clinging to it. When she turned, Sam saw that, although she was in her middle years, the woman's features retained a youthful attractiveness. Her face was smooth, even round the eyes, as if age had concentrated on her hair and left the rest of her unblemished. Or maybe it was all down to liberal use of Oil of Ulay.

'You startled me,' Sam said, mainly because she thought she ought to say something.

'I'm sorry. It's unusual to find anyone here. 'The woman's voice was as smooth as her skin. 'Once we open, it will be rather busier.' She smiled. 'I hope.'

'Open?'

'The exhibition.' The woman pointed to a sign above the door she was closing: THE MARTINIQUE EXPERIENCE: TOULOUR MARTINIQUE - THE MAN AND HIS ART.

'Of course,' Sam said. 'Art. Everyone's looking forward to the show.' She smiled and offered her hand. 'I'm Sam, by the way. Sam Jones.'

The woman looked at Sam's hand, her lip curling slightly.

Sam looked at her hand. 'Sorry,' she muttered, and wiped it on the towel round her neck. 'Just on my way back from the gym. Are you running the show?'

'I am curator of the exhibition, yes.' This time the woman did take Sam's hand. She shook it briefly and stiffly. 'Tullus Gath.'

'All set? I gather you open the exhibition soon.'

Gath nodded. 'In a day or two. All being well. We're waiting for the President.'

Sam wasn't sure about this. 'Of the society?' she hazarded.

Gath's eyebrows moved slightly closer together and a line began to wrinkle on her forehead. 'The President of Batturul,' she said, 'is visiting Vega in a few days.'

Sam grinned. 'Of course. And you're not going ahead and opening before he arrives?'

Gath's eyebrows made no effort to return to their normal positions. 'Before she arrives, no. We hope to have a special opening reception.'

'So you're about ready to open, then. This seemed like a safe comment.'

'We are. Just a few details here and there.' She smiled suddenly, and, apart from her severe hair, suddenly looked little older than Sam. 'I've been working flat out since I got here, three days ago. Unpacking, setting up. But I'm about finished now, and I could do with a drink.'

Sam smiled back. 'I can imagine,' she said. 'The casino bar's not bad,' she offered. 'Just don't play any of the games.'

A huge and largely unnecessary bandage taped to the side of his head, Harris Stabilo made his way from his hotel to his casino. He was still inwardly seething at the indignity of being attacked in his own office. What would people think? What people thought - image - was of extreme importance to Stabilo. How should he react to the crisis, and, more importantly, how should he be seen to react? It was all becoming too too much, he decided as he fuffed his way over to the bar and demanded the barman get him a gin and tonic. When he had a moment. If he would. Please.

As he sipped his drink, Stabilo surveyed his casino. There was the usual push and shove round the gaming tables, the sounds of clinking glasses and the hubbub of conversation, hi one corner, Bigdog was obviously losing as much as usual, and venting his frustration physically on the croupier while Vermilion Kenyan tried to pull him away. Across the room, the strangely dressed fellow who never bet much over half a dinari was obviously enjoying himself, and Mr Antherzon was, mercifully, nowhere in sight.

As he watched, Vermilion finally managed to drag Bigdog away from his losing streak and the croupier's neck. They exchanged some words, though Stabilo was in the wrong half of the enormous room to hear quite what they were, and Bigdog strode out of the Casino. He was obviously not having a good day, Stabilo reflected. But, as his head started to throb again under the bandage (and perhaps, he admitted to himself, because of the tightness of the tape securing the bandage), Stabilo found it difficult to summon up much sympathy.

As Bigdog left, Vermilion following behind him to the door, he passed a woman coming in. He seemed not to notice the tall, thin woman in the grey suit as he pushed past. But Vermilion obviously did. Stabilo could see her take in the newcomer's designer suit and expensively straightforward haircut. Stabilo recognised Tullus Gath at once; he knew who she was from the hotel register. But he was pleased to see that Vermilion, even if she did not know the woman, had obviously spotted her as a lady of means. Good thing too. It was about time Vermilion worked on her commission. When she was working she was far and away the best of his girls.

When. Stabilo would be sorry to lose her. He knew her ambitions, knew she was staying only as long as she needed to save up enough money

to leave. To get away. To set herself up on her own. Doing what she wanted.

As he finished his drink and chewed carefully on the slice of lemon that had arrived with it, Stabilo was pleased to see that Vermilion was already showing Gath round the casino. He smiled as the girl beckoned to a cocktail waiter.

The sound was a low buzzing. Quiet at first, then it grew in volume until it was insistent and intrusive.

Solarin made no effort to answer the communicator. He had been lying on his back on the bed, eyes closed. There was a while yet before his services were needed, before it was time for him to fulfil the clauses of his current contract. Until the job was done, he expected and wanted no contact with anyone. And nobody knew who he was or where he was, except his employer.

Yet the communicator continued to buzz. A red light flashed in time to the sound, as if that might be more persuasive. He raised himself up so he was leaning on an elbow, and stared at the communicator. It continued to flash and buzz.

Solarin reached out to the bedside cabinet. But he was not after the handset. He picked up a coin - a bronze one-plaudit piece. The coin spun in the air, landing next to the communicator. The sound of the coin spinning itself to rest was almost obscured by the continual buzzing.

Solarin inspected the coin, seeing that it had landed face up. He sighed, and lifted the handset. 'Yes?' His voice was low and calm.

The voice at the other end of the signal was deep, also speaking in low tones 'You know who I am,' it said.

'I don't get many calls,' Solarin replied. 'More than I was expecting, though.'

'A matter has arisen.'

'Oh?'

'Don't worry,' the voice continued. 'It does not affect our existing agreements. Rather, there is an additional opportunity, shall we say.'

'Another matter you wish me to take care of?'

'Indeed.'

Solarin considered. 'Not on an open channel,' he said. 'You know better than I do how leaky the hotel communications system must be. We need to meet.' It was bad form, but he could think of no alternative.

'Where?'

Solarin reached for the Vega Facilities Guide lying beside the communicator. He opened it at random. 'The casino,' he said looking at the picture on the page. His finger stabbed into the middle of the descriptive text beneath, landing on the phrase 'superbly stocked bar facilities'. 'I shall be at the bar,' he added.

'When?'

'Soon.'

There was a pause. 'And how shall we know each other?'

Solarin was already leafing through the book again. He stopped without looking, and ran his finger down the liquid crystal of the page. It came to rest on an advertisement for a clothing supplier on Level Three: 'Style-Wear - fancy dress, old-world elegance and style, and opera attire...' There were several small pictures of men, women and even a Canvine dressed in outfits presumably supplied by the store. He rolled a die, then counted to the fourth picture clockwise from the top left. 'I shall be wearing an old-fashioned dinner jacket and black cravat.'

Again there was a pause. Then the sound of the person at the other end of the link exhaling. 'Of course,' the voice said quietly. 'Then I shall be dressed similarly. I suggest we use the same identification phrases as on our initial communication.' Then the connection was broken, replaced by the quiet hiss of empty static.

The problem, Fitz had decided, was finding a way of gracefully admitting that the whole thing was a mistake, and couldn't they just bugger off somewhere else. The first day at the Casino had been interesting and fun. The third was a bore. He was also beginning to feel that his choice of clothes was far from sensible, but he was too proud to tacitly admit this by changing style completely. And the longer he left it, the harder it became to change, or to admit that he needed coaching in any of the gambling activities, or that he had lost his initial stake. It always looked so easy in the films - you just rolled a few dice, or placed some chips on a random number and then raked in the winnings.

The Doctor, by contrast, looked like he was happy to sit out the full week as agreed collecting the Vega currency equivalent of ha'pennies and farthings.

Yes, Fitz decided finally, the time had come to admit defeat and misjudgement. Well, just as soon as he'd had another martini to get his confidence up. He was sitting perched on one of the tall stools at the bar. The top was able to turn, which was sometimes of use, and sometimes rather disorientating as it seemed prone to do this on a whim. Fitz turned back towards the bar, catching hold of the polished top as he arrived to avoid turning too far and ending up facing back out again.

As he turned, he caught sight of a man crossing the casino towards him. The man was tall and unremarkable - he would be lost in a crowd, he looked so ordinary. Except for one thing: he was dressed in a dinner suit not unlike Fitz's, and wearing a black bow tie together with a white dress shirt. He seemed so out of place that Fitz watched him all the way to the bar. Part of his brain was telling him that here was vindication for what he was himself wearing. Another part was saying, 'See what a berk you must look.'

But, before one side of his mind could win out over the other, the man sat down on the next stool and fixed Fitz with a determined and forceful stare. "They say the weather in Disropul is inclement at this time of year," he said quietly.

Fitz looked round to see who the man was speaking to. But there was nobody else within earshot. At the far end of the bar, the barman was polishing a glass with a lazy cloth and carefully ignoring any indication from customers that they might be interested in a drink.

Fitz turned back to the man, and raised an eyebrow. 'Sorry?'

The man's eyes dropped and he sighed. Then he seemed to gather himself, and hissed again, "They say the weather in Disropul is inclement at this time of year." He raised his eyebrows back at Fitz as he leaned slightly closer, obviously expecting an answer.

Fitz gulped. Why did the weird ones always sit next to him? 'At least it never rains on Vega,' he said, hoping this would be enough to satisfy the man and show some wit without committing himself to a full conversation about the weather on various local planets.

The man pursed his lips together, apparently annoyed by the answer. 'Snows,' he said.

'What?' This was getting ridiculous.

'Snows,' the man repeated. 'It never snows on Vega.'

'Er, no,' Fitz admitted. 'I don't s'pose it does.' He gulped. 'Can I help you?' he asked. 'Are you lost perhaps?' Escaped from somewhere?

The man's eyes narrowed. There was a funny clicking sound coming from somewhere below the level of the bar as he regarded Fitz suspiciously. Fitz risked a quick glance down at the man's hand below the bar. He was holding a pair of dice, clicking and rolling them together. Probably a compulsive gambler, Fitz decided. Obviously it had affected him deeply. Well, he'd come to the right place.

The man looked down as Fitz looked back up, as if to see what Fitz had been looking at. Or to see the numbers of the dice. When he looked back at Fitz, he said clearly and carefully, 'It is said that x times y is the same as y times x .'

Fitz nodded slowly, wondering quite what he had done to deserve this, and how to escape from it. 'Is it?' he said. 'Is it really?'

The man was watching closely. He shook his head slowly, an expression of disgust creeping across his face. 'I don't suppose you know anything about quantum physics,' he said at last.

Fitz smiled. 'Not even how to spell it,' he confessed.

'I thought not.' The man stood up, and gave Fitz a brief valedictory nod.

'I'm sorry to have bothered you,' he said. Then he turned and strode from the Casino, still shaking his head.

'No bother,' Fitz muttered. He rapped loudly on the bar with his knuckles to get the barman's grudging attention. 'Oi, service at this end, please.'

He was just taking his first sip at the martini when he realised that someone had sat down next to him again. At first Fitz thought it was the same man come back for some more repartee and gibberish. But, when the man in the dinner suit turned to him, Fitz could see that in fact it was someone else.

This man's face was slightly fatter, his build bigger. And in addition to the dinner jacket, dress shirt and bow tie, he was wearing an obviously false moustache. It looked as though he was also wearing make-up, and his eyebrows were suspiciously bushy and dark. He nodded conspiratorially to Fitz. Fitz nodded back. There was something familiar about the man, though he couldn't for the life of him think what it was.

The man raised his impossible eyebrows slightly, as if inviting comment. And Fitz, totally caught up in the bizarreness of the situation, said in his best Russian accent: "They say the weather in Disropol is inclement at this time of year." He drew out the last word, rolling the final 'r'.

The man smiled, the pale make-up caked on his face cracking slightly round the mouth. 'But it never snows on Vega,' he said. His voice was deliberately quiet, a rich and deep baritone.

Fitz gaped. Then he smiled back. 'They say that x times y is the same as y times x ,' he said, wondering if he had got that quite right.

The man nodded, apparently taking the non sequitur in his stride. 'But not always in quantum physics,' he told Fitz. Then he grabbed Fitz's hand and shook it vigorously. He looked round carefully, then added, "Thank you for coming."

'Oh, pleasure,' Fitz said, so surprised he forgot to be Russian. He was just beginning to wonder whether he had been wise to start this weird conversation when the man drew an envelope from his pocket and thrust it at Fitz. Fitz made to open it, but the man closed his large hand round Fitz's.

'Not now,' the man hissed, looking round again. 'Your target is a human,'

he went on. "There's a picture inside.'

Fitz nodded dumbly.

'The target is here somewhere on Vega, we know that much. But no more. The image is from a secure-cam video. It's quite old now, but it should be enough to confirm identity. 'The man looked round again. "There is also a tracker which will lead you to the target. People change over time.'

'And when I find this human?' Fitz heard himself ask through a sudden fog of alcohol and confusion.

The man stood up and put his hand briefly on Fitz's shoulder. 'Kill him, of course,' he said.

Chapter Four

Pictures at an Exhibition

The office was sparsely furnished and drab. President Robyn Drexler had got as far as removing the military honours, the plaques commemorating famous victories, the pictures depicting those victories and the swords and weapons of honour. But, where the trappings of the previous government had been withdrawn, there was as yet nothing to replace them. Nothing save a small holoprint of her husband in a silver frame on the desk beside the calendar.

She waited for the door to close behind the last of the delegation, paused a moment, then pressed the intercom button set into the desk surface.

'Yes, Madam President?' The voice was tinny, muted and distorted by the small speaker concealed in the desk.

'Send Phillips in, would you?'

A slight pause. 'Er, he's not here, madam. He's escorting your guests out of the palace.'

'They weren't my guests,' Drexler hissed barely above her breath. Then louder, 'Well send him in as soon as he's back.'

'Yes m-'

Drexler cut the connection and leaned back. She rubbed her tired eyes with the heels of her palms and yawned. She could not get rid of Phillips, not yet. It was too soon to make such radical changes. She needed to keep some of the old regime in place if only to mollify the members of the military junta who still commanded the armed forces. Getting an election held was a major triumph. Winning it and not having the results declared invalid was something of a miracle - an indication of just how far public opinion had moved on in the decades since the war.

Which made it all the more incredible that the delegation from UPF - the United Planetary Front - had been granted time on her schedule. Why her chief of staff, General Browning Phillips, had assumed she would have anything to say to them - or they to her - of import or relevance, she had no idea. But she would ask him. And he had better have a good

answer.

She looked again at the picture of her husband. He smiled back at her, his face vital, young, handsome. It was an old picture, captured during one of his early militant speeches, just as their struggle was beginning. She smiled at the paradox - how he looked so much younger since the picture was so old. She lifted the frame from the desk, holding it up so she could see the detail.

He was in his late middle age now, just as she was. Where there were the lines of a smile in the picture there were now the lines of age. Where his hair was dark and straight it was now grey, thinning and wispy. The picture had been captured twenty years ago, just as they started their struggle, their mission to restore Battul to democracy. How far they had come since then. How much they had won.

And lost. There were no pictures of children beside the framed husband. That was one sacrifice of their struggle. To her, perhaps the greatest. Her husband's sacrifices had been in many ways harder - his reputation and academic standing. They were things he had possessed before - tangible assets stripped away by the protest marches, the speeches, the outspoken interviews and the spell in jail. But now they were restored. He was exonerated by events.

Her own sacrifice - in which he shared, of course, though she had no idea exactly how much - was not something that had been taken away. Rather it was a denial. The loss of something she had never had. And now never would. As she angled the picture slightly, the light caught on the surface, reflecting her own face back at her for a moment. Her grey eyes overlapped her husband's; the wrinkles and crows' feet just beginning to show gave a sudden, approximate impression of how her husband had aged. How they had both grown older.

She replaced the picture carefully on the desk and looked round at the bare walls. There were marks where the plaques and paintings had been removed, areas of dark on the faded paintwork. Were the pictures she had removed really different from the one she had brought with her? Her picture was also a symbol of her own struggle, of her victory over the oppressors.

Her husband was making a speech, was extolling the virtues of democracy and of bloodless revolution. That was very different from the set battles against the Canvine depicted in the paintings now gathering

dust in the palace archives. Very different from the attitudes and prejudice voiced in her office just minutes previously by the UPF delegation. Attitudes that she would make it her mission to change, prejudices she would do her best to dispel.

'A complete waste of time!' Gerrurd Dith was livid. He could barely contain his anger until they were alone, the three of them and Phillips. 'She hasn't the wit to see the danger or the spine to stand up to it.' The leader of the UPF delegation rounded on Phillips. 'You told me she would be receptive, that she would be sympathetic to our cause.'

Phillips said nothing. Better to let the man expend his rage.

'Sympathetic? She barely even listened. Good grief, we'll have Canvines applying for work permits before we know it. Invasion by stealth, this time. Well they couldn't invade us last time, and they won't this time.'

Phillips coughed politely. 'I think we tried to invade them, actually.'

But Dith was not listening. 'Taking the bread from our children's mouths.' He had no children, actually. And, if he had, they would certainly not have had to eat bread. 'I think you owe us an apology,' he went on, shaking his head. 'And a refund.'

General Browning Phillips sighed. 'I think not,' he said quietly.

'What?' blustered the UPF leader. 'You can hardly call that value for money. I paid you -'

'You paid me to arrange an audience with President Drexler. I made no guarantees as to the outcome of that audience any more than I did when I arranged similar meetings between yourselves and the previous administration.'

'They at least understood the problem. They listened.'

'Be that as it may, I made no guarantees then and I make none now. In fact I suggested, you will remember, that you wait until after the President's visit to Vega before approaching her. I make the same recommendation now.'

They were almost at the main doors of the palace. Dith paused and turned to face Phillips. 'And what makes you think she'll be any the wiser or more accommodating then? Apart from the thought of another hundred thousand plaudits in your account for the privilege of arranging the meeting?'

Phillips smiled. 'Oh believe me, the Presidential position on the Canvine situation will be much closer to your own ideals after the visit.'

Dith's eyes narrowed. 'Oh?'

'If nothing else,' Phillips went on, 'she will have seen for herself the horror of the Canvine at close hand. I doubt if she has ever even met one. But she will. She'll have felt the fear they engender. She'll have tasted the foul stench in the air nearby. Just as you and I have.'

'So if her current position is so contrary to what she will discover, so contrary to the truth,' asked Dith, 'why is she going?'

Phillips smiled. 'Apparently, she has an interest in Toulour Martinique. And there is an exhibition of his work opening soon on the Vega Station. Henri Blanc is exhibiting a good portion of his collection, I believe.'

Dith grunted. 'Arty-liberal nonsense. Typical.' He shook his head. 'She'll be going to the opera next.'

'Didn't you have some dealings with Blanc?' one of the others hazarded. 'When he was part of the Junta's advisory council.'

Phillips shrugged. 'Our paths have crossed. But the point is, the President will see for herself the reality of the Canvine and all they stand for.'

Dith said nothing for a while as he considered Phillips's words. 'I was surprised,' he answered eventually, 'that you agreed to stay on as chief of staff. That you made the transition to the new government so easily.'

'So were several others,' Phillips acknowledged. 'Including President Drexler and her husband.' He reached out and shook the UPF leader's hand. 'You know your way out from here, I'm sure.' He shook hands with the other two UPF people as well. 'Democracy must have its day, you know.'

Dith's expression suggested he might not agree completely with this. But he said nothing except, 'I'll be in touch. 'Then he turned, and marched towards the exit, his colleagues following in his wake.

The woman was standing watching the roulette wheel as it spun its course. Vermilion stood next to her. She said nodding, waiting for the woman in the grey suit to begin the conversation. The woman was certainly sophisticated, probably rich. A good chunk of commission, with luck. She was alone, and might welcome some company - advice on what to see and do, suggestions of where to meet people, maybe even a few introductions.

But the woman made no effort to make conversation. She did not even acknowledge Vermilion's presence, despite the fact that they were standing very close. This might be harder than she had anticipated. Vermilion waited for the wheel to start spinning again, then asked, 'Are you not betting?'

The woman turned towards her, a slight smile on her lips. 'I never bet,' she said. 'Except on certainties.'

Vermilion smiled back. 'That must take all the fun out of it.'

'And the risk.'

'You don't like risk?'

The woman turned back towards the roulette. "That depends on the reward,' she said.

'So, why are you here?' Vermilion asked after a short pause.

The woman shrugged. 'I've been busy. Working. Needed a break. This seemed as good a place as any.'

'Have you been to any of the exhibitions?' Vermilion asked.

The woman gave a short laugh. 'I've had enough of exhibitions for the moment.'

The roulette wheel spun to a halt, the silver ball resting on eleven. There

were murmured oaths, a couple of excited gasps. People drifted away before the next round. Others took their places.

The woman turned away from the table, and drained her glass, tipping it right back to get the last drop. 'I've been setting up an exhibition on Level Five,' she said. 'I could do with another drink.'

She did not offer Vermilion one. Well, sometimes it took a while. 'Let me get it,' Vermilion said. 'Same again?'

'Thank you.'

Vermilion looked round, and was pleased to find Trew already standing close by. She nodded to him, and he disappeared back towards the bar.

'The only exhibition on Level Five,' Vermilion said as she led Tullus Gath to a table, 'is the Martinique one.'

'That's it.'

'And are you ready to open?'

'Nearly.' Gath took her drink from the silver tray Trew was holding. 'Very nearly.'

Vermilion leaned closer. 'If you need any help with staffing...'

'Thank you, but I think we shall manage.'

'What about the reception? For the President?'

Gath looked at her over the top of her drink. 'You know about that?'

Vermilion smiled. 'Well?'

'Maybe. You know some people?'

'I know lots of people.'

'And of course,' Gath said with the trace of a smile, 'your own services are always on offer, no doubt.'

Vermilion leaned back in the chair. 'A girl has to make a living. I'd love to

see the exhibition sometime,' she went on. 'I don't know much about Martinique's work, but I've heard so much about it.'

They paused in front of one of the larger canvases. So far Vermilion could not honestly say that she had been impressed. The paintings, or whatever they were, must be among the most bizarre and unsettling things she had ever seen. And she had seen a lot of things.

Tullus Gath seemed to be waiting for Vermilion to comment. So Vermilion nodded as if she knew what she was looking at. She clicked her tongue in an approximation of appreciation.

'Murdering art,' Gath said quietly.

'Ah.' Vermilion wondered what she was talking about. 'Yes. Mmm.'

Gath looked at her suspiciously. 'You know it, of course.'

'Oh, of course.' Vermilion gulped. 'That is -' she started to admit.

But Gath was looking at the painting again. She seemed suddenly oblivious of the younger woman's presence. 'The most famous of Martinique's works. And the most mysterious.'

There was something there along with the awe in her voice, Vermilion felt suddenly. She could read voices, detect nuances that the speaker was not even aware of. But she could not work out what it was behind Gath's words.

The painting offered no help. It seemed just as grotesque as the others she had seen. It showed a man standing in the middle of a room. The floor was bare boards, and the walls were rough plaster with no adornment apart from two small windows. There were two other figures in the room, one each side of the man. One of them was pulling the man's head back by the hair, so that he was forced to look up at the ceiling, his features thereby obscured by the angle and his neck stretched tight. The other figure was drawing a knife across the exposed throat of the man, a line of red following behind the knife and the blood running down from the side of the wound. A viscous cascade of red splashed to the wooden floor, forming a puddle.

This image was disturbing enough. But the two figures killing the man were not human. The one pulling the man's hair was a red-skinned devil. Its face was a gargoyle-grotesque complete with horns, malevolently glowing eyes, and forked tongue licking out of the mouth. A similarly forked tail curled round behind the figure, the dual end rearing off the floor like an excited snake caught up in the blood lust.

The creature holding the knife, inflicting the killing wound, was a salivating monster. Fangs poked out of a blood-red mouth which slashed across a pallid face. The pale face was surrounded by dark, matted hair that was dripping with some sort of unguent. The chest of the creature was an oily mass of hair that stretched down below the waist. The legs were as pale as the face, thin and bony. They culminated in large hooves, a ring of hair splaying over the top of each.

Outside the windows of the room, life seemed to be going on as usual. There were several people walking past in the street outside. Rolling hills faded into a misty distance.

It did not seem to Vermilion that anyone could possibly like the painting. Appreciate it, perhaps. Certainly the detail in the figures was every bit as fine and lifelike - or deathlike - as in all Martinique's other works. She knew this was something to do with the way he scanned in actual images, staged in his studio by actors and models, but somehow that made the scene all the more sickening. This was not just one man's extraordinary fantasy or exorcism, but rather a tableau. She looked away, concentrating on the small plaque painted on to the bottom of the picture instead.

The writing was embedded into the work, a part of the painting rather than set into the frame as with some of the others. The lettering was faded, and the inscription, now that Vermilion looked at it, seemed almost as unsettling as the painting itself.

MURDERING ART

'Martinique's most famous painting,' Gath said quietly. 'His final work.'

The casino was quiet. Although it was always open, this late at night there were few guests there, and fewer staff. The hotel foyer too was silent, the desk clerk reading a cheap thriller in the back room, half an

eye barely on the screen that showed a view of the desk.

The short corridor that bypassed the main doorway that linked the hotel and the casino was also quiet. Quiet, but not empty. The lighting was low, dimmed to a minimum for the 'night'. From the alcove opposite the hidden door someone watched, waited, in the shadows. Sure enough, another figure was slowly and carefully approaching, making its way quietly along the corridor. The figure was massive, a huge hairy shape. It stopped opposite the alcove, leaning forward into the pale light.

Bigdog Caruso paused a moment, listening intently. Satisfied that he could see and hear nobody, he took a compact electronic device from a pocket of his jerkin and placed it against one of the wooden panels in the corridor wall. A tiny light began to flash on its fascia as it operated. With his other paw he pulled out a small aerosol spray can from another pocket, and squirted a thin mist of the pheromone-laden chemical into the air close to where he held the device.

The detection systems hidden within the panel received a signal that Security Chief Cage's hand was pressed to the access panel. A moment later they detected her pheromone imprint in the sampled air from the corridor.

Bigdog looked around again as the door slid silently open. He glanced into the alcove behind him, but saw nobody. Then he stepped through the open door, allowing it to close behind him.

The room concealed behind the panel was fairly small, made to seem smaller by the masses of equipment that lined the walls. The operator's chair was empty, nobody was on duty. Bigdog crossed quickly to the main control systems and pressed the button that ejected the log disc. He carefully lifted out the optical disc, his large fingers surprisingly delicate. He flipped over the electronic device he had used to simulate Cage's palmprint. On the reverse was a small disc reader, and he slotted the optical disc into it.

It took less than three seconds to copy the data from the disc into the device's internal memory. It would be encrypted, of course. But that was no problem: Bigdog had known the decryption keys for months. They rarely bothered to change them these days - complacency and laziness.

Moments later, the door into the corridor opened again, and Bigdog cautiously stepped out. He looked round again. Once more, he failed to

see the figure standing pressed back into the shadows at the rear of the alcove opposite. Bigdog waited for the door to slide shut behind him, concealing the secret room once more. Then he slipped the electronic device back into his pocket and set off down the corridor towards the casino.

The room was silent apart from the clicking of Solarin's dice. He rolled them in his fist, clicking one over the other. Still the communicator was silent. He threw the dice on to the coffee table, scooping them up again almost immediately.

Nothing.

What had gone wrong? Had his cover been blown? Certainly the dimwit he had spoken to at the casino bar knew nothing of consequence - an unfortunate error.

Solarin made a decision - below seven, and he would return to the casino and try to make contact again. Seven or over and he would get some sleep. He rolled the dice again. Nine. Good. He could do with the sleep. His contact would be in touch again soon, once he realised that the meeting had been blown.

The man hiding in the alcove remained silent and still. He had arrived in good time. He was still expecting someone to come to the secret room. Still waiting.

After a short while, the silence of the corridor was disturbed by the sound of heavy stertorous breathing and the shuffling of heavy footsteps attempting to keep quiet and having only moderate success.

He peered out from the shadows, ducking back again as the huge hairy figure made its way along the corridor towards him. Sure enough, it paused outside the hidden door, running a paw over the wood panelling, feeling, scratching. After a few moments, it found what it was looking for - the slight crack along the edge of the panelling where the door was hinged.

The figure hesitated only a moment longer, then turned and lumbered

away, back towards the deserted hotel lobby.

The man in the shadows pulled a large grubby handkerchief from his jacket pocket and dabbed at his damp forehead. It was hot, uncomfortably hot, here in the corridor. He needed to find somewhere cooler. He needed to consider what to do next. How to proceed. When to make his move.

Gath had finally managed to get rid of the woman, which was good as she had other things to attend to. Vermilion Kenyan had seemed interested enough at first, and Gath always found it refreshing to talk to someone else about her passion, to share her love of Martinique's work with another. And, if they knew less about him, the greater the joy of sharing his Art with them.

But Gath had other things on her mind now. It had been a useful exercise to show Vermilion round, had enabled Gath to check the flow of the exhibition and ensure that there was a logic to the order. Walking round with Vermilion, talking her way through the exhibits, had allowed Gath to satisfy herself that everything was ready.

At the front of the exhibition, near the main entrance and screened off behind the opening displays, was a small office area. Sound baffles reduced the noise from the exhibition area, and also made sure that conversations within the office area were kept private. It was from here that Gath called Henri Blanc.

Blanc's weathered face swam into existence about the desk, seemingly decapitated yet still mobile. It swung to and fro in the air, the silver hair seeming to glow, providing another source of light in the gloom of the exhibition hall.

'Ah. Tullus.' His voice was cracked, slightly wheezy. He had aged less well than his partner. 'Everything is on schedule?'

'Of course,' she told him. 'I was just calling to let you know we're almost ready to open.' She smiled. 'I know how you worry.'

Blanc did not return the smile. 'Oh, I have every confidence in your ability to run the show without me,' he said.

The smile froze on her face. 'But, you will be here soon. You are coming to the Presidential reception.'

Blanc's pale lips pursed. 'I imagine I shall be there in time. But there are some business details that demand my attention here for a short while yet.'

'You can't be serious.'

'Why not?'

'I need you here, Henri. You know I do. Now .'

'How touching, my dear.' Now he did smile. It was a thin, empty gesture. 'I have every confidence in you, you know. I shall be there as soon as I can manage. Call me if there's a problem.' The face leaned forward slightly and Gath could tell he was reaching out to cut the link.

'Wait,' she cried.

Blanc's smile froze in the air, Cheshire-Cat-like as the face seemed to fade around it. Then the light scattered, and the image was gone.

Despite the sound baffles, Gath could hear footsteps outside in the exhibition area. Then there was a polite cough from the opening that served as the doorway to the office area, and she spun round, surprised by the intrusion.

'I do apologise,' the man said. 'The main door was open. And I felt sure you would want to see me.' He stepped into what light there was and Gath could see that he was a fat man in his middle years. A short cape hung down behind him, giving him a silhouette almost as ridiculous as his own figure.

'And who are you?' Gath asked.

'Newark Rappare.' He sat down on the spare chair, uncomfortably close to her. 'My partner Mr Forster and I run an antiques business here on Vega.'

Gath shifted her chair away from Rappare. 'We're not selling,' she said. 'Mr Blanc has the most extensive and comprehensive Martinique collection in existence. He wants to keep it that way.'

Rappare nodded enthusiastically. 'A true collector. I understand, of course. Indeed, I share his passion.'

'For Martinique?'

'Oh, for many things. Many things.' He shifted his chair closer to Gath's and she leaned back to escape the smell of his breath.

'Yes, well, as I say,' she went on, 'Mr Blanc owns almost every extant Martinique. He would not be interested in parting with any.'

'Oh quite. Quite.' Rappare smiled, his teeth gleaming suspiciously and unnaturally white in the faint light. 'Which is why I am here. To offer you, to offer Mr Blanc, a previously unknown Martinique painting.'

Gath felt the blood drain from her face. Was it possible?

'I assume,' Rappare was saying as he rubbed his sweaty hands together, 'that Mr Blanc would be interested in that.'

'Just so long as they're not for you.' Bigdog hesitated long enough to look into Vermilion's eyes before he handed over the package.

'Of course they're not. I'm not that stupid.' She took the package from him and slipped it into her bag. 'Macleb's well gone. He's desperate for them. And that's not my fault; she added. 'He was addicted when he got here. I'm doing him a favour.'

Bigdog grunted without comment.

'Come on,' Vermilion said, running her hand over his hairy shoulder. 'You know how much I want to get away from here. If I don't get them for him, someone else will.'

'And you need the money more than they do?' Bigdog asked.

She smiled 'You got it. Every plaudit brings me a bit closer to getting away.' She raised her bag as she turned to go. 'Thanks,' she said.

'And am I just a means to an end as well?' Bigdog asked as she got to

the door.

She turned back, just for a moment, just for long enough for him to see the depth of feeling in her eyes. He had hurt her, though he was not sure how. It had seemed a fair question. But before he could ask, the door was closing behind her.

When the card changed, Fitz was gobsmacked. He almost slipped off the bar stool, and gaped comically at his drink as if that were to blame. Then he recalled Sam's comment outside the opera: "They cheat, you know.'

He had looked through Your Personal Guide to the Facilities of Vega Station in his room, and noted that the paper seemed thicker than he expected with a shiny, almost slippery texture. He had listened while first the Doctor and then Sam had explained about something called liquid crystal and told him that the pages were not printed on, but somehow acted like television displays that could be changed and updated from a remote source by some sort of radio wave. But he had not really understood except that it meant the pages could show flashing and animated content. Which was quite neat, really.

But playing cards, that was something else.

The man in the wheelchair, Forster, was without his usual partner for a change. He was playing against the Doctor, which was why Fitz was paying such close attention. He was sitting behind Forster and could see over the man's shoulder as he fanned out the cards and shuffled them into different positions, keeping the suits together. The cards were familiar, yet different from what Fitz was used to. The numerals and court cards were pretty much the same, and there were four suits. But rather than hearts, clubs, diamonds and spades they seemed to be blobs, lights, smudges and splashes. Or something.

But, whatever the differences, Fitz knew enough about poker to tell that Forster was cheating, big time. He watched as the man reached into his jacket pocket and removed a tiny object made of metal. He followed Forster's movements closely as the man ran his thumb over the surface of the object, careful to keep it below the level of the table and - he thought - out of sight of any onlookers. Then Forster brought his hand up to his cards, the device concealed in his palm. And that was when the

card changed. One moment it was a three of blobs, the next its face shimmered and swam before reforming as the queen of splashes.

Fitz struggled to keep his balance perched up on the stool. As soon as he had managed that, he looked at the Doctor. The Doctor was leaning back in his chair on the far side of the table. His cards were fanned out in front of his face, but his eyes were visible over the top of the hand - and they were looking back at Fitz. As Fitz opened his mouth to try to send the Doctor a silent, mimed message, the Doctor lowered his cards so that his face was fully visible. He was still looking at Fitz, his gaze intent, focused. He gave the barest shake of his head, then lifted his cards again.

Fine, thought Fitz. So he doesn't want my help. No problem. He swung round on the stool to look round the rest of the room. On the far side, Harris Stabilo was making the rounds, shaking hands and swapping good mornings with his clientele. For a moment, his eyes made contact with Fitz's. Fitz held the man's gaze for a couple of seconds, but there was something unsettling about it, a depth and meaning he could not fathom. Probably nothing. Imagination. But he looked away, turned back to his coffee and breathed in the rich deep aroma.

Rappare had joined Forster and the Doctor now, and was watching the game. He seemed to be keen for them to finish, was obviously itching to talk with Forster in private, almost hopping from one foot to the other in pent-up excitement. Fitz turned his back to them, checked that there was nobody nearby, and drew the envelope out of his jacket pocket.

Fitz had already spent a while examining the tracker. More than long enough to know that he hadn't a hope in hell of working out how to use it. Best, he had decided, not to touch the thing.

His fingers shaking slightly, Fitz drew the photograph out of the envelope again. It was a still from a surveillance video, apparently. Taken here in the casino by the roulette table, but many years ago, probably soon after it first opened judging by the brightness of the pattern on the carpet. But, despite the passage of time, Fitz felt he would be able to recognise the man without trouble. He didn't look like the sort of person who shirked publicity or hid in the shadows. Fitz slipped the picture back into the envelope.

At first he had been rather thrilled at the thought that he had been mistaken for a secret agent of some sort. An assassin - a hit man. But in

the cold light of day, or as close as you got on Vega, it suddenly seemed less of a good idea. He was supposed to kill someone, for God's sake.

And, if he didn't, there was no knowing what the people who thought they had hired him might do.

And, if they found out he wasn't the man they had hired, there was no knowing what they might do.

And, if the real hit man found out that Fitz had blown his cover and taken his place, there was no knowing what he might do.

No knowing. But Fitz could make some pretty good guesses.

Chapter Five

Out of The Darkness

It was for tradition as much as practicality that the power control centre was on Vega's lowest level. It made sense to keep the utilities out of the way, but they might just as well have been at the top of the station as in the basement.

The lighting, on the other hand, was more practical in design. Since most of the service corridors and facilities on the lowest level were rarely used, there was no point in keeping the lights on. In fact, considerable savings could be made to the power consumption if the areas that actually generated that power, which gathered the light of distant stars and boosted it inside massive transformers, were kept in darkness. Simple proximity sensors meant that lights came on as someone approached, and were extinguished as they passed.

Efficient, Vermilion knew, but hardly aesthetic. It also made it very difficult to negotiate your way round the lower level, since you could see only where you were - not where you had been or where you were headed. Get lost, and you were really lost. Fortunately, she knew exactly where she was going. And, since it was the main facility that needed monitoring and maintenance, the Power Control Room was well signposted and close to the elevator.

She knocked quietly on the door, knowing that Macleb would hear; would be listening, waiting. Sure enough, the door opened almost immediately to reveal Macleb's grinning face as he stared out into the pool of light in the corridor outside.

'You came,' he breathed, unable to keep the enthusiasm from his voice. 'I knew you would.'

'Did you?' Vermilion asked, raising an eyebrow. 'Such confidence in the laws of supply and demand.' She waited three seconds, then said, 'Are you going to stand there gawping, or can I come in?'

'Sony.' He stood back, hand still on the door, and gestured for her to enter the small room.

It was early afternoon, and the casino was busy. It was better that way, easier for Solarin to blend into the background, to fade into the crowd. He was dressed in a nondescript suit, his expression as unreadable as his features were unmemorable. He walked slowly between the gaming tables, not speaking to anyone, not placing any bets or joining any games, not drawing attention to himself in any way other than by the fact that he was not drawing attention to himself.

It did not take long for the professional assassin to find what he was looking for. The man was still wearing the same ridiculous attire as when they had met. The same antiquated formal suit, or an identical one. He was at the bar, chatting to a young woman with short, blonde hair. They seemed completely oblivious of Solarin as he took a seat at an empty table nearby - close enough to observe, not so close as to be observed. He could not hear what they were saying, but that was not a problem. He had a miniature directional microphone built into his watch, remote-wired to what looked like an earring. When he wanted, he would be able to hear every breath that the man drew.

But, for the moment, Solarin contented himself with watching the man, and looking round the casino. So much gambling, but to such low-risk ends. Money - sometimes large amounts of it, true - were won or lost on rolls of the dice, on cuts of the cards, on spins of the roulette wheel. But these people were not winning or losing anything of real value. They were playing for financial gain or loss. Solarin was not interested in such odds. He played for keeps. He played for life.

The arrangements were almost all made now. The logistics were more straightforward than for most state visits, whether foreign or domestic. Since Vega was relatively small in terms of both physical size and population, it was easy to arrange the President's agenda.

Phillips's main concern had been that President Drexler would decide the trip had no value and back out. Her passion for Martinique was hardly sufficient to make the trip a Presidential visit, after all - however unique the occasion of Blanc's exhibition on Vega might be. It would be easy to cancel. Making the arrangements, having them set now, made Phillips feel more sure that the visit would go ahead.

And, once she was on Vega, the real work to turn the political situation round would begin. Once Drexler saw the Canvine close up, once she

met one, once she had been close enough to smell the stench of their deception and demeanour, then things would change. They had to. This current path of acceptance, tolerance, indulgence even, had to end. He reached for the communicator, called up Drexler's office and left her a message.

'Madam President, I just wanted you to know that we have now completed all the preparations for your forthcoming visit to the Vega Station. I'll give you the details when we next meet, but the flights and accommodation are set.' He paused, then added, as if as an afterthought, 'Oh, and there is to be a reception in your honour to officially open the Martinique exhibition.'

Solarin shut off the microphone with a grunt of disgust. Nothing. No clues as to what the man was up to. He had a name - Fitz - but nothing more. The man seemed to have several close associates, but either they were using an extremely sophisticated code system, or he had not confided in them the state of play of his operation - whatever it was.

The woman had spent most time with him, talking about the casino, about how some of the card games were played, and about some art exhibition. The conversation had ended with the man declining the young woman's invitation to go with her and try to get a sneak preview of the paintings.

'I was speaking to Vermilion last night,' the woman had said. 'She said they're seriously weird.' She grinned suddenly, her whole face affected by the movement so that it seemed to scrunch up into a ball of mirth. 'Just your cup of tea, I should think.' The man made no comment, and she added, 'Or coffee. No?' She shrugged. 'OK.'

Solarin filed away the name Vermilion for later reference -another associate perhaps? The man had said little, revealed almost nothing about himself during the conversation. A professional, that much was clear. A consummate professional.

Solarin wandered over to the roulette table. A decision was forming in his mind - red or black? That would be the decider.

The wheel spun, the ball clicked round between the tiny numbered compartments on the rim. Black. Solarin nodded grimly, and glanced

back towards the bar. The man Fitz was raising a coffee cup, almost as if toasting Solarin - as if mocking him - although Solarin doubted he had been recognised.

Black. So be it. Solarin's usually impassive face was set into the hint of a smile as he strode from the room. Black. How appropriate.

When the entry chime sounded, Gath expected it to be the fat man and his friend, coming as Rappare had promised, to discuss the painting further and testify as to its authenticity. She was wrong.

It was the young woman she had spoken to on the mezzanine the previous day. She was dressed in a one-piece jump suit of pale blue rather than the shorts and shirt she had worn when they first met. It made her seem somehow older, and more relaxed.

'Hi,' the woman said, pushing her fair hair back away from her eyes.

'Yes?'

'How was the casino?'

'What? Oh, fine. Thank you.'

'No problem.'

They stood looking at one another for several moments, neither speaking.

Gath broke the silence. 'Was there something...?'

The younger woman shuffled self-consciously, looking past Gath into the dimly lit gallery beyond. Avoiding making eye contact. 'Er, well. I was talking to Vermilion last night,' she said. 'About the exhibition.'

'And she suggested I might need some help?' 'What had she said her name was? No - gone.'

'Oh no,' the woman said quickly. 'It just sounded fascinating. The paintings. I've not heard of Martinique before, you see.'

'Not heard -' Gath broke off in astonishment. 'What did you say your name was?' she asked. 'I do apologise, I've quite forgotten, I'm afraid.'

'No problem. It is quite unusual, I s'pose.' She grinned. 'It's Jones. Samantha Jones.'

'Well, Samantha Jones, I'm surprised you have never heard of the greatest artist of the era. Most people remember his death, even if they are unacquainted with his work.'

The woman shrugged. 'I've been travelling,' she said simply, as if that could explain it. 'Not much time for art appreciation, I'm afraid.' She cocked her head to one side - girl rather than woman suddenly. 'Perhaps it's time I started.'

Gath considered. She could do with the distraction. On the other hand, now was hardly a convenient time. But with Rappare and his colleague coming round soon anyway...

'Why not?' Gath said. 'Come in and I'll show you around.'

They were drinking champagne out of transparent plastic tumblers. It was not, Vermilion reflected, the way to do it. Quite apart from the lack of respect it showed for the expensive drink, the cheap plastic imbued the liquid with a faint aftertaste. And it smelled.

Not that Macleb seemed to notice or care. And he was the one paying, after all. Just as he was paying for the snappers. But there was the principle of the thing. And he swigged it like beer, so he probably didn't know any better. Give it another minute, then she would leave him to enjoy his addictive haze of snapper-heaven. A tumbler or two of champagne was a small price to pay for the plaudits in her pocket. Good old-fashioned cash. A little more to add to her savings, a little closer to getting away from here. Away from people like Macleb.

This train of thought did not prevent Vermilion from reaching across Macleb and grabbing the half-empty bottle by its neck. She was sitting in a swivel chair at the main control panel, Macleb in the chair's twin beside her. She lifted the bottle from the ico-therm bucket and poured herself another generous glass. Plastic. Whatever.

She was just replacing the bottle, leaning close enough across Macleb to smell the unpleasant sweetness of his sweat, when the door behind her burst open. She turned to see who it was, but her view was blocked by Macleb as he too turned.

Macleb cried out in alarm and tried to stand up. His knee caught Vermilion's shoulder and sent her crashing to the floor as the chair skidded away from under her. Her head smacked against the edge of the control panel as she toppled forward.

She had a confused view of Macleb standing, turning, shouting. Of the door ripped from its hinges and toppling slowly sideways, tearing free of its support with a creaking of tortured metal. The doorway was full of shadow, hairy shadow that blotted out the pool of light immediately outside even as it was silhouetted against it.

The world was upside down now as Vermilion struggled to stand, to see clearly, to dispel the haze from the champagne and the blur from cracking her head. Her vision swam as she crawled away, trying to get as far from the approaching shape as possible. She was aware of shaggy arms reaching out for Macleb, lifting him off the floor, somewhere above her as she curled up under a secondary panel, pushing back against it, trying to burrow into it.

Something hit the panel above her. Hard. She could no longer see Macleb. Only the huge tangle of fur or hair as it lunged at the control panel. Then her view was suddenly obscured. It took her a moment to see what it was, for her eyes to refocus on the thing that had fallen down in front of her, hanging down from the control panel above her so that it almost reached to the floor. Almost, but not quite. It hung there, swaying slightly in a nonexistent breeze.

It was Macleb, his hair hanging straight down from his head, brushing against the floor as he swung back and forth. An arm flopped down and slapped to the floor. His eyes stared at Vermilion, but she could tell at once that they could not see her.

There was a guttural, animal snarl from behind Macleb. Then everything went dark. Vermilion screamed.

When she had finished screaming, she realised that there were two good things about the darkness. One was that whoever was at the controls could not see her. The other was that she could not see what it

was that she could hear dripping to the floor under Macleb's swaying body.

Gath had given Sam a brief tour of the exhibition, enough to explain to her how it was laid out. Then she had returned to her office area, screened away near the entrance. So Sam was alone, standing looking at one of the bizarre paintings when the lights went out.

The darkness was so sudden and so complete that Sam took a moment to register that she wasn't just blinking. But after a split second, and still with no trace of light, she knew it was more serious than that. And it was silent too. It had often puzzled Sam how she could become aware of the sound of the central heating back home seemingly just at the instant it cut out. The effect now was the same. As the silence took hold in the darkness, Sam realised that she had been hearing, though not listening to, various low-level sounds - the hum of air conditioning and life support, the pulse of some faraway oxygen pump, the faint buzz of the electrical and lighting systems.

All were now quiet. And, impossibly quickly, Sam was finding it difficult to draw breath. Panic, she decided. Fear and anticipation rather than an actual lack of oxygen. She breathed a little easier for the thought.

'Hello?' she called out, partly to reassure herself, partly to check she had not suddenly gone blind and deaf, and partly because she realised that Gath must be as worried and troubled as she was.

There was no answer. Sam tried to recall the way she had come in, the direction and the obstacles - paintings - on the way. Could she carefully retrace her steps to the entrance and Oath's office? There was only one way to find out.

But, even as she reached out into the silence and darkness, Sam froze. There was a sound, ahead of her. Close by. It was not Gath stumbling about looking for her. It was someone treading very carefully, but knowing where they were going. A swish of material, a rustle of cloth perhaps. Then a faint scratching sound, like a fingernail running down a rough wall.

'Hello,' Sam called out again. 'Anyone there?' Stupid thing to ask she decided as soon as she had spoken. If there was, and she was sure

there was, they would answer anyway - if they wanted to. And, if there wasn't, there was no point in asking. But then came another sound. Whoever it was seemed to have abandoned all pretence at silence. The noise was like a sheet being ripped down the middle. It tore through the darkness, making Sam take a step backwards. She felt the painting behind her wobble, and grabbed at it desperately.

The sound was gone. Only the thumping of the blood in her head remained. And the darkness.

There was a perverse logic to it, though Vermilion did not appreciate it just at the moment. While the lower levels were kept in near-darkness when all was well, they were the very areas where work would be needed if anything did go wrong with the power supply. Consequently, it was the lower levels that were blessed with an emergency lighting system. It was fed by an antiquated ethanol-powered generator that automatically cut in when power to its main switch was cut off.

This generator now churned out a megawatt-and-a-half exclusively to power the grimy green bulbs set into wire-mesh casings along the roof of the utility level of the station. Exclusively, that is, with the exception of a room concealed behind wooden panelling off the short and redundant corridor between the hotel reception and the casino, to which power was essential and constant.

So Vermilion was one of the few people on Vega who could see again just a few moments after the systems failed. Everything was stained an even, brilliant green as she pulled herself out from behind Macleb's lifeless body and stumbled to her feet. She caught the fleeting impression of fur or hair in the doorway, and staggered after it.

'Bigdog?' she called, her voice strained. But there was no reply. When she reached the door and tottered unevenly into the corridor outside, there was nobody in sight. Just inside the door was a glass-covered emergency button. It was intended as a fire alarm, but Vermilion didn't care what sort of emergency it was for.

She hit it. The glass cover shattered, one shard of glass scraping along her hand, but she did not notice.

Silence.

Vermilion laughed out loud. Nervous, hysterical. Of course - no power. That there was an emergency was obvious, so why waste precious energy broadcasting the fact?

The Doctor was better off than most. His ability to see in total darkness was rather limited, but it was slightly better than nil. He could discern larger obstacles, and he could make out the general melee as people in the casino milled round, bumping into one another and crying out in fright and confusion. He sat impassively in the centre of it all, knowing that to join the rush and tumble would not help. Better to wait for some clue as to what was going on and the best way to tackle it. Running about was not going to help - it was obvious from the total blackness that the lights had failed throughout a good part of the station, not just here in the casino. Where did anyone think they were going? And it was not the failure of the lighting system that worried him so much as the fact that he could no longer hear the gentle hum of the life-support systems.

His options were limited. Without Sam and Fitz there was little he could do. Perhaps he should make his way back to the TARDIS. Thanks to a subtle manipulation of the time-path indicator he had managed to materialise inside the hotel room he had not yet been allocated when they arrived, albeit nearly fifty years later than planned. She really was playing up rather recently. He must get around to giving the old girl that ten-million-year service one of these days.

Fitz he could see at the bar, his dim outline barely visible as he seemed to be tugging on his jacket. But the Doctor had no idea where Sam might be.

The Doctor looked round again, hoping for some inspiration. It was instructive that the view from the huge main window had 'gone out' with the lights. As he suspected, it was not a view at all. Which was a pity, as it would have afforded some faint light. If only he had brought his everlasting matches with him...

Even as the Doctor thought this, he heard the scrape of a match-head along the side of the box. Of course - Fitz had a box of matches. There was sudden calm, almost silence, as the tiny flame flared into life at the bar. Fitz's grinning face was clearly visible beside it as he held the match triumphantly aloft. There was a general hubbub of sound, quieter than

the previous panic, as people began to pick themselves up and make their way more carefully, towards the light. Drawn like moths towards the flame.

Fitz was obviously enjoying the moment. But then, suddenly, his expression changed to one of anguish and he cried out - a sudden shriek of sound as the match burned down to his finger. His hand leapt in pain, and the flame died.

Silence again, just for a moment. The only sound was Fitz's plaintive cry of, 'Sorry, everyone. Hang on a mo. 'Then another match flared, and Fitz's contrite features were revealed again.

Two matches later, security guards arrived carrying portable lights. The Doctor recognised the woman in charge - he had seen her around a few times. As she passed by the table where he sat, the Doctor called out, 'Excuse me.'

'Don't worry, sir,' she said without looking at him. 'We have everything under control.'

He kept his voice matter-of-fact and low. 'No, you don't,' he said.

She turned to look at him then, her face slightly shadowed from the nearest light. 'What do you know about it?' she demanded.

The Doctor smiled, opened his hands on the table as if to show he was hiding nothing. 'Quite a bit, actually. I think you need some help sorting out your lighting.'

'Do you?' She started to turn away.

'And of course your life-support systems.'

She paused, then turned back.

'In fact, your power supply generally.' He stood up. 'I do have some experience in fixing these things. Why not let me take a look?'

The woman seemed to consider. 'Our engineers are working on it,' she said. But she hadn't said no.

'Well, perhaps I can help them out,' the Doctor offered. 'A second

opinion, perhaps. Or maybe they're out of their depth, you never know. Does this happen often?' he asked brightly.

'Never,' she said.

The Doctor nodded. "That's what I thought. Why not show me where the power systems are controlled from?' He took her arm, ignoring the way she looked down at his hand in surprise. 'After all, what can you lose?'

When the lights came back on Sam was shuffling slowly, carefully, forward with her arms stretched out in front of her. She coughed, and let her arms drop back to her sides, embarrassed. She looked quickly round to see if there was anyone within sight. There wasn't. She had been aiming for the main entrance, and was annoyed to see that she had barely moved from where she had been when the lights went out. And the distance she had covered was in the wrong direction.

'I must eat more carrots,' she murmured, and headed back for the entrance, calling out to Gath.

She paused at one painting. It was, like all the others, mounted on a free-standing screen or partition. It was a large painting, with a heavy gilt frame. And it was slightly skewed. Maybe Sam had walked round in circles, passing this painting on her tour in the darkness, knocking it slightly out of alignment.

She remembered the picture quite well. It was one of the pastoral scenes where you had to really look to see that there were nasty creatures lurking in the undergrowth. Or in the corn, in this case. The overall impression was of a field of wheat or corn, swaying in a slight breeze and almost glowing in the brilliant sunshine of a glorious summer's day. But, when you took the time to look closer, there were eyes peeping out from between the stalks, and on the edge of the field there was a shadowy creature - a huge hairy nightmare with jutting stained teeth and curled claws leering out of the woodland that bordered the field.

Sam reached out to straighten the picture, looking it over again as she did so. She could not honestly say that she liked any of the paintings she had seen, but she did appreciate the work that must have gone into them. There was a degree of detail that went way beyond what she had

seen in other paintings. She had done some of the big galleries - the Tate and, on a visit to Paris with her parents a lifetime ago, the Louvre and the Musee D'Orsee. She preferred the impressionist approach to fields, she decided as she stepped back. There was something almost too clinical in the execution of Martinique's work. Something in the detail that spoke of a clarity so close to reality that it might as well be a photograph.

Except for the subject matter, except for the bizarre features that populated Martinique's imaginary worlds. At least she hoped they were imaginary. She looked again at the edge of the woodland, at the creature emerging from the shadows. And drew in her breath sharply.

There were two of them.

That wasn't right, surely. She was certain there had been just the one creature. It was still there, just as she had remembered, but now another creature stood beside it. Surely she could not have forgotten - the second creature was further out of the woodland than the first, clear in the sunlight. She looked round, thinking that maybe she was mistaken, that maybe this was another, almost identical, work but not the painting she remembered.

No. Here was the strange seascape complete with massive serpent rearing up over the tiny steamship as the sailors scurried for the lifeboats. And there was the panoramic view of a farm, hills in the distance behind and weird birds whirling in the sky above. Strange farm machinery poked out of a barn, and on the hillside behind it an easel stood alone, as if the artist working there had upped and left on a whim.

Gath was waiting at the entrance. 'Are you all right?'

Sam nodded. 'Yes, thanks. You?'

'Fine.' She continued to look at Sam, as if expecting some other comment, some further remark.

'Where was Moses when the lights went out?' Sam asked, feeling she was expected to say something.

'In the dark?' The suggestion came from the doorway behind her, and

Sam whirled round in surprise.

Rappare was there, Forster beside him. Rappare was smiling, obviously pleased with his answer.

Sam waited for them to come into the exhibition, for Forster's wheelchair to clear the doorway, before she corrected Rappare. 'Under the bed, looking for the matches.'

She didn't wait for a reply, but nodded to Gath, murmured a 'thank you' and set off towards the casino. She was sure that the Doctor and Fitz would be OK, especially now the lights seemed to be working again. But she wanted to check.

The room was in turmoil. There were wires running over the tops of the consoles that a few minutes earlier had been buried inside them. Inspection covers and panels lay discarded on the floor. The door was propped up against a wall it had not been designed ever to have close contact with. The Doctor sat back and surveyed his work with satisfaction. He clicked his sonic screwdriver shut and popped it into his pocket.

'That should do for now,' he said. 'A bit makeshift, but quite satisfactory, don't you think?' He turned and beamed at Cage, who stood behind him, her arms folded. Her face seemed to be set into a permanent scowl. 'You don't,' the Doctor concluded. 'Oh well.'

Macleb's body had been removed, and a first attempt made to remove the stains from the floor and secondary console. Several security guards were standing around, looking for the most part pretty bored with it all. Vermilion was sitting in the second chair, perched on the edge, hands curled round a beaker of water. She was shivering.

'Are you all right?' the Doctor asked kindly.

She looked up for long enough to give a quick nod. Then she returned her attention to her water.

'You saw nothing?' Cage's voice was less kind. 'Nothing at all?'

Vermilion gave a quick shake of her head without looking up. 'I told you,'

she said into her drink.

'So you did. You were just passing, and you heard noises. Then the lights went out.' Cage's voice was getting louder. 'Then the lights went out, so you say.' She unfolded her arms, put her hands on her hips and leaned forward, towards Vermilion. 'Well, Miss Kenyan-'

She stopped in surprise as the Doctor stood up and put his hand on her shoulder. 'Not now. Not yet,' he said quietly. 'She's in shock.'

'You don't go into shock just by hearing noises and sitting in the dark for a while,' Cage retorted, making no effort to lower her voice.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'That may be. But it can wait. Let her sort it out for herself. Then ask her about it. When she's ready.'

'And I suppose you're an expert in detection and questioning as well as in repairing power systems?'

The Doctor gave no indication that he thought this might be a rhetorical question. Instead he grinned like a schoolboy with a merit star he knew he richly deserved. 'Well, yes, I must admit I do have some expertise in those areas.'

Cage glared at him. 'Get her out of here,' she said to the nearest guard. 'I'll talk to her later.'

Vermilion did not look back until she was well away. Then she checked quickly that she was not being followed. The corridor was clear, and she quickly dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

Then, after another furtive check, she took a side passageway and made her way towards the Martinique exhibition. Getting away from Vega was even more important to her now. And, if her suspicions were correct, much, much closer.

It made no odds to Rappare where they spoke, so long as there was some light. So he and Forster followed Gath into her office area without comment. They would have been happy to discuss the matter out

among the paintings, but she was insistent that this was business and business was to be done in her office. No matter.

Rappare slipped the sleek metallic scanning device back into his pocket. He would ask for a brief tour after they had spoken, she could hardly refuse. He would get the scans he needed then. He smiled at Forster, and winked discreetly, letting his partner know that there was no problem.

Gath's questions were predictable. How did they know the painting was genuine? How certain were they of its pedigree? Where had they got it from?

Forster answered as many questions as Rappare. It showed that they both knew intimately what they were talking about. Helped to convince her that they were as genuine as the painting they wished to sell. Forster smiled thinly when she asked about how they had come into possession of the painting. 'Madam -' his voice was reedy, a nasal whine - 'you surely cannot expect us to divulge confidential client information of that nature.'

'I worked for Martinique for the best part of his professional life,' Gath replied. 'I thought I knew where every one of his works had ended up. I arranged most of the sales. I think it is only fair that you tell me how it came into your possession.'

'Then I am sorry that we must disagree,' Rappare intervened. 'Perhaps you will be able to trace it from the source, once you know more about it.'

'I shall need to see it.'

'Of course, of course.' Rappare smiled. 'All in good time. You will appreciate that we are concerned to know that you are really interested before we make any commitments ourselves.'

'Then perhaps you can describe the painting to me,' Gath suggested. She flipped open a notepad, and took up a stylus ready to make notes on the LCD screen. 'What is the subject matter.'

'Ah,' Rappare said, 'that is easy enough.'

'In fact; his partner offered, 'the subject matter itself will help establish

the authenticity of the work, given that you knew the great man himself so well. You and Mr Blanc both, I believe.'

'So?' she asked.

So they told her.

The stylus hovered over the screen, making no mark. Gath sat, frozen in position as they described the painting to her. Then she swallowed, laid down the stylus and closed the notepad. 'I must speak to Mr Blanc,' she said, her voice husky and dry. 'And he Will want to see the painting.'

After that, she seemed quite happy for Rappare and Forster to wander round the exhibition unaccompanied. They took only as long as Rappare needed, then saw themselves out. Rappare glanced into the office as they left, intending to say goodbye, to promise that Gath and Blanc could see the painting whenever they were ready.

But Gath was busy with another visitor. She seemed intent, worried, preoccupied. Angry perhaps? So he said nothing, following the gentle hum of Forster's wheelchair out on to the mezzanine. Leaving Tullus Gath and Vermilion Kenyan to continue their hushed conversation.

Chapter Six

Details

'My assistants,' the Doctor said proudly as he introduced Sam and Fitz.

Sam had found Fitz in the bar showing off his matches to a small crowd of interested people. He was explaining them as essential survival aids for galactic explorers. The more sheltered of the audience were lapping it up, hardly noticing that Fitz dodged all questions about where to get them or how they actually worked. 'It's the very low-tech nature of them that makes them so indispensable,' he explained.

Before long, the Doctor had reappeared, together with a group of men and women in uniform and a woman he introduced as 'Miss Cage - Vega's head of security.' Now he was explaining that Fitz and Sam were his assistants, and that he -the Doctor - was a noted detective and general solver-of-things.

It impressed the hell out of Sam and Fitz.

Harris Stabilo - faffing around and reassuring his clients that never before, and never again, and so on - also seemed impressed. Cage made a point of introducing the Doctor to him. At first, Stabilo seemed wary, wringing his hands and saying how awful everything was. But then he seemed to catch sight of Fitz for the first time, and, as if reassured by his confidence and demeanour, was all smiles. 'Oh yes, excellent idea. Get the Doctor and his friends to help out with your investigations. How wise, how wise.' He looked round, waved to several people who ignored him, then turned back to Cage. 'I'm glad to see that you're already making such good progress on this matter,' he said. 'Not that I'm worried, you understand. Utmost confidence,' he quickly went on before taking his leave of them.

'Of course, sir,' Cage said before turning to the Doctor. She seemed now to have accepted that he and his friends were there to help. 'Can I leave you to bring your colleagues up to date while I make my report?'

'Report?'The Doctor seemed amused. 'I thought you were in charge here.'

'I am.' Her reply was immediate, perhaps just too quick, Sam thought.

'Then who do you make your report to?' Sam asked.

Cage did not answer for a moment. Then she looked away from them. 'It's for the record,' she said. 'You understand.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Of course I do,' he said at once. 'We'll wait for you here.'

'What was that about?' Fitz asked after she had gone.

'I'm not sure,' the Doctor admitted. 'Probably not important. Now, let me tell you what I know.' He had barely finished his first sentence before he broke off and frowned at Sam.

'What?' she asked.

The Doctor inclined his head towards Fitz, on the other side of the table. He was looking across the room, apparently staring into space, obviously oblivious of the fact that the Doctor and Sam had stopped to look at him. Sam turned to follow his gaze, but apart from an unremarkable, tall man there was nobody and nothing of note in Fitz's line of sight.

'Are you still with us?' she asked, tapping him on the arm.

Fitz flinched. 'What? Yes, of course..'

'Nicotine deficiency,' Sam whispered loudly to the Doctor. Fitz scowled, and said nothing.

He was in the ultrasound shower when the call came in. At first Henri Blanc thought he would let the answer-bot handle it. But he could hear from Oath's voice that she was desperate to speak to him.

Pulling on a robe and tying it loosely at the waist, Blanc picked up the call.

'I said we have a problem, damn you, Henri,' Gath was saying as he connected.

'What problem?' he asked. Her head, floating in midair in the living room,

swivelled round so that Blanc could see her face. It showed her relief.

'Thank goodness. Yes. Several problems.'

'Oh? Then tell me.'

He listened while Gath described Vermilion's visit -. who she was and what she had wanted. He nodded as she finished her account. "That's not really a problem, though, is it? We planned for similar contingencies. I think you know what to do.'

She looked annoyed. 'Right; she said at length. 'But I'll tell you something you two hadn't planned for. This Martinique the two antiques brokers claim to have.'

'What about it? Have you seen it yet?'

'No,' she admitted. "They'd rather wait and show it to us both at once.'

'You mean over a remote link?'

'I mean in person. I think you'll want to come here, to Vega, to see it.'

'Do you?' His tone betrayed how unlikely this was.

But Gath ignored it. "The painting,' she said,'the Martinique -they claim it's a self-portrait.'

Blanc gaped. 'Is it possible?' he asked when he had recovered a little.

Gath shrugged, her head dipping slightly as she said, 'Who knows? Anything's possible. Can we take the risk though?'

'All right,' snapped Blanc. 'All right.' He shook his head. It seemed that he had little choice now - events were running away with him. 'I'll get the next shuttle,' he said.

They found him at the near-deserted Opera House, waiting for the evening performance to begin. Most of the Canvines had left Vega, at the end of their trip. The next party was not due for another week, which fitted well with the Presidential visit. Fitz had been particularly keen to go

with the guards that Cage sent to bring in Bigdog, and Sam had decided to tag along to keep Fitz out of trouble. The last thing they needed was Fitz and Bigdog having a set-to.

To Cage the course of action seemed clear-cut, though the Doctor had seemed less convinced. Cage's argument was that Bigdog, or one of the Canvines for whom he was deemed to be responsible, had raided Stabile's office, which was all news to the Doctor, Sam and Fitz. Added to this was Vermilion's continuing reluctance to add to her statement of what she had witnessed on Level Zero despite entreaties from the Doctor, threats from Cage, charm (for want of a better word) from Fitz and straightforward questions from Sam. Vermilion's relationship with Bigdog was hardly a secret, and to Cage's mind he was one of the few people she would lie to protect.

'The only way to get the truth out of that woman,' Cage had said in exasperation, 'is to pay her. And that's against my principles.'

'Likes money, does she?' Fitz had asked with his usual finesse and subtlety.

Cage smiled, though only her mouth seemed to know it. 'She's desperate to get off Vega. Wants to set up some sort of farm or ranch on one of the outer worlds, so I hear. That needs a fair bit of dosh. More plaudits than a cocktail hostess can earn in a year or two. Even without the expensive tastes that go with the job.'

'You can't fault her for having ambition,' Sam said.

'Of course not. We all have ambitions,' Cage said. 'It's how we go about fulfilling them that makes the difference.'

So it was agreed, or rather so Cage decided, that it was time to talk to Bigdog again.

But, standing in front of the massive Canvine in the opera house as he sat clutching a bag of raw red chunks of meat and glared at her through bloodshot eyes, Sam was not suddenly convinced of the necessity of the operation.

'Now then, 'Fitz said in his best Sweeney Todd tones, 'are you going to come quietly, sir?' He somehow made it sound as if he was spelling 'sir' with a 'c' at the front. And a 'u' in the middle.

Bigdog swung his huge shaggy head to look at Fitz, as if noticing him for the first time. He stuffed a hunk of meat into his mouth, and chewed on it slowly. His jaw opened wide as he chewed so that they could see the red mess being torn apart inside. 'I never do anything quietly,' he rasped, picking at his teeth with a sharpened claw.

Then, as if that was the end of the matter, he turned round to face the stage and settled back into his chair.

Sam exchanged glances with Fitz. 'Oh well,' she said quietly, 'we'll be on our way then. Er, sorry to have troubled you.'

Fitz frowned at her. 'I really think you should come with us, you know,' he said to Bigdog, almost but not quite tapping him on the shoulder.

Bigdog grunted, sighed, turned round again. He glared at Fitz, then at Sam. Then he grimaced at the security guards with them in what might have been intended to be a smile. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'if Miss Cage wishes to see me, then who am I to argue? She has only to ask politely and of course I am at her disposal.'

He pulled himself to his feet, towering over the humans standing beside him. 'Excuse me, won't you?' he said to the Canvine who was sitting beside him in the box.

His fellow waved a hairy paw deferentially. 'I'll tell you what you missed later.'

'Oh, I'll be back for the interval,' Bigdog promised. Then he pushed through the guards and started down the stairs behind the box.

'Good dog,' Fitz murmured quietly to Sam as they followed. She grinned.

But ahead of them Bigdog turned, strode back up the stairs towards them. His face was suddenly close to Sam's own, thrusting forward at Fitz so that the massive jaw almost touched Fitz's nose. She could smell the stench of the meat on his breath and shuddered to think what Fitz must be enduring.

'Even a dog,' the Canvine said evenly, 'has better hearing than a human.' He straightened up. 'You'd do well to remember that.'

Fitz did not move until Bigdog was out of sight at the bottom of the stairs, leading the guards out of the opera house. Then he turned to Sam.

'Whoops,' he said. Very quietly.

The figure standing in the shadows at the bottom of the stairs watched as the Canvine left the opera house with the guards. The other two, the young man and woman, left close behind them. He watched them go, as he had watched them arrive.

Even in the shadows it was hot. He pulled a silk handkerchief from his top pocket and dabbed carefully at his forehead.

The transformation was significant. As they sat and listened to Tullus Gath, Rappare and Forster were quiet, restrained, professionally detached. They nodded appreciatively when Gath told them over the link that Henri Blanc would soon be arriving on Vega and would take a look at their Martinique. They thanked Gath for her trouble and for keeping them informed. Rappare said he looked forward to meeting Blanc and showing him the painting. Forster appeared to stifle a yawn.

But, as soon as the link was cut and Gath's face disappeared from the space above the dusty and book-strewn desk in the office of their shop, their demeanour changed.

Rappare let out a whoop of delight and started dancing round the piles of detritus, laughing almost uncontrollably as a stack of books toppled over and formed a crude damn across one passage through the mess. Forster was all but bouncing up and down in his wheelchair. He rubbed his hands together and cackled with dry laughter.

After a while, their mirth subsided. Rappare collapsed into the chair beside Forster again and wiped a tear from his eye.

'Oh dear, oh dear,' he said, opening his eyes wide to try to dispel the brimming moisture.

'We've done it,' Forster said. "They want the painting. Really want the painting.'

'It seems that way,' Rappare agreed. Then he collapsed into a fit of giggles. 'We'd better see if we can find it; he said between bursts of laughter.

Gath leaned back in her chair, hoping she had not sounded too eager to see the painting. No, she decided, Rappare and Forster had not seemed too bothered. Probably they had no idea of the real value of what they had in their possession. Probably.

She looked at the clock on the desk. Good - time for her next appointment. And the sooner that it was out of the way the better.

Sure enough, there was a knock on the outer door of the exhibition.

'Come in,' Gath called. 'It's open.' She waited for the visitor to find her way to the office, making no effort to get up or to greet her. Ah,' she said as the woman entered, 'Miss Kenyan.' She laced her voice with sarcasm: 'How nice to see you again so soon. I've been considering your proposition.'

Bigdog scowled at Fitz and Sam as he passed them. He paused only to shake hands with the Doctor, to whom he seemed decidedly more deferential, then he strode off.

'Any joy?' Sam asked. She and Fitz had not been permitted to sit in on the Doctor and Cage's interrogation of Bigdog.

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not really.'

'He says it's nothing to do with him, or with any other Canvine,' Cage said. 'God alone knows what his motives really are.'

'I thought he ran some sort of travel company,' Sam said.

'Oh, he does,' Cage agreed. 'But he's a Canvine, despite his chosen home and the company he keeps.'

'He says he was in his apartment when the power failed,' the Doctor

said. 'And, apart from the possible connection with Vermilion, there's really not much reason to doubt his story.'

'Except that it took someone very strong to kill Macleb,' Cage said. 'To me that means a Canvine.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not necessarily.'

'Oh?'

The Doctor turned and looked her dead in the eye. 'Would you say I'm very strong?' he asked.

This seemed to amuse her. 'Not really.'

But the Doctor was serious. 'Strange,' he said quietly, 'because I could break you in half as easy as sneeze.'

There was silence for a moment. Awkward silence.

'Is that a threat?' Cage asked eventually. 'It's an illustration,' the Doctor told her.

'Appearances can be deceptive,' Fitz explained. 'That's what he's saying.'

Cage looked at him. 'So I see,' she said.

Sam grinned. 'Sarcasm,' she said to Fitz's bewildered gaze. 'I love it. So what do we do now?' she asked the Doctor.

But it was Cage who answered. 'We pull Vermilion Kenyan in for proper questioning.'

The Doctor nodded grimly. 'A pity,' he said. 'But that does seem to be the only course open to us.'

'No other clues at the scene of the crime?' Fitz asked.

Cage shook her head. 'We ran DNA tests. Nothing. Only the people you'd expect to find traces of - skin fragments, sweat residuals, the usual. And Vermilion, of course.'

'Of course,' said Sam. 'So what will you ask her?'

'We have to find her first,' Cage said. 'My people tell me she's disappeared off the face of the station.'

Sam and Fitz exchanged worried glances.

'Don't worry,' Cage said with an uncharacteristic smile. 'They're not very experienced at this sort of thing. Anything more than a Saturday-night drunk and they're out of their depth. It probably just means she's not in her apartment or at the casino. We'll find her soon, no doubt of that.' She glanced at her watch. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I still have some paperwork to clear up ahead of the President's visit. And I've just discovered that the great Henri Blanc is gracing us with a visit.'

'And who is the great Henri Blanc?' the Doctor asked.

'He used to be scientific and cultural adviser to the government. The previous government. But he's coming here as it's his paintings that are going on show to the President in the Martinique exhibition. Tullus Gath is meeting Blanc's shuttle in a few minutes. But I want to be there as well.' She sighed. 'It's as well to show the flag, give the impression at least that we care.'

'Where are we going?' Fitz asked for the third time.

'Not far now,' Sam told him. 'There's something I want you to see.'

Fitz pulled the battered packet of Camels from his pocket and shook out a cigarette. He put it between his lips, reaching for his matches, then caught sight of Sam's expression and took the cigarette out again. He held it between his index and third fingers, keeping it where she could see it.

'What?'

'I thought you were giving up.'

He put the cigarette back in his mouth. 'I am,' he said round it. 'But not through choice. And not yet.'

Sam reached out and tugged the cigarette from his mouth. His upper lip stuck slightly to the dry porous paper, pulling with it. 'Hey!'

Sam regarded the cigarette with a mixture of disdain and annoyance. Fitz grabbed it back before she could scrunch it up. He stuffed it into the packet again. 'I'll have it later since it's annoying you so much.'

'It's annoying me,' she said. 'But it's killing you.'

'I don't know why you're so worked up about it,' he said. 'I'll have to give up as soon as I've finished this packet anyway.'

'You're irritable,' she told him, pausing to get her bearings, then setting off along the corridor again.

'I am not irritable.'

'Don't worry.'

'I'm not.'

She ignored him. 'It's quite understandable. It's nicotine deficiency.' She paused and turned back towards him. She was smiling, her face full of sympathy. 'It'll probably get worse.' Then she was off again.

He quickened his pace to catch her up. 'I am not irritable,' he ground out through his clenched teeth.

Sam patted his shoulder. 'Of course not.'

They had emerged from the corridor into an open area with several doors off it. A brass railing ran round the open side of the area, and there was a view out over the central well of the station. He could see the cafe area what seemed like miles below.

'We're here,' Sam said.

'Where?'

She indicated one of the doors. 'Gath has gone off to meet this Blanc guy. So we can sneak in and have a look round.'

'The art exhibition?'

She nodded. 'The art exhibition.'

Fitz followed Sam to the door. 'And why would we want to do that?'

The door was not locked, and Sam pushed it open. The lights were on inside, splashing pools of luminance over the paintings, a pathway of stepping stones of light stretching into the distance. 'I thought you'd be interested. They're really weird.'

Fitz followed her in. 'Yeah, you said.'

'There's something I want to check as well.'

Sam was off along the path of lights, obviously heading for a particular point. Fitz followed her slowly, pausing to look at the bizarre paintings on the way. He frowned at the beast bearing down on the angel, and smiled at what seemed to be a woodland scene. Until he noticed the eyes watching him from the undergrowth.

As Fitz made his way through the exhibition it seemed to him that the paintings became, if anything, more strange and unsettling. Or maybe there was a cumulative effect.

Sam was examining a bright picture of a hillside bordered by woodland. She looked round as Fitz approached her. 'What do you reckon?'

'You're right,' Fitz replied. 'The products of a seriously warped mind. And I should know.'

Sam gave him a half-smile, took his hand just for a moment.

'What were you looking at?' Fitz asked.

She shrugged, then pointed to two unpleasant-looking creatures standing upright at the edge of the woodland. 'I remembered there being only one of these. Then later, there were two.'

Fitz grinned. 'Thought you'd check again? Want to be sure you're not going round the twist?'

'Something like that.'

Fitz experimentally moved his head from side to side, swaying his body too as he watched the creatures. 'Funny how their eyes follow you round, isn't it. I noticed it with the goblin things in the undergrowth on that one near the way in.' He waved vaguely back towards the entrance without bothering to look where he was pointing. Suddenly he was an art critic, thumbs pushed into jacket pockets, head thrown back as he appreciated the work: 'And one of the most striking features of the Mad Painter's work was his use of colour.' Fitz's voice was plummy, over-refined. 'Observe how the Nasty Creatures are at odds with the Nice Countryside, how the composition suggests that underlying spark of genius that characterises the complete nutter.'

'So, which one wins your mad-painter-of-the-week award?' Sam asked.

'So far, the angel being squashed by the monster. But maybe because that was the first one I saw.' Fitz was at a loss to describe quite what the emotional effect of the paintings was. Certainly they were disturbing. 'They sort of shock you, don't they?' he said.

'You ain't seen nothing yet,' Sam told him. 'Come and look at this one.'

She led him further into the exhibition. They arrived at the furthest point from the door, as the path curled round and started back. It was as if the whole exhibition was laid out to bring you to this point, no matter what path you decided to take. The painting on the end wall was quite large, its frame ornate gilt. The title of the picture was painted into the scene itself, there was no other explanation. 'Murdering art .'

Fitz almost gasped when he saw it. 'You're not kidding. Christ, this one is seriously deranged.' He shook his head as he took in the scene - the man whose throat was being slit by the two unholy creatures that held him. The ordinary everyday life going on outside the windows of the small room. 'It's the little things, the background stuff that makes it so... weird.' He pointed to the view through the window, tapping his finger on the tiny but detailed figure of a small child - a boy of perhaps eight - running down the street. 'I mean, look at that.'

Then his finger froze.

'What is it?' Sam asked when Fitz still did not move. 'Wet paint?' she laughed.

'No, it's just...' He pointed to another figure, behind the boy. It was a

young woman. All the other figures in the street were happy, smiling - a contrast to the events in the room to which they were oblivious. But this woman was not smiling. Her hands were to her mouth, her face an expression of horror, as if she were somehow privy to the awful scene taking place out of her view in the room.

But this was not what had drawn Fitz's attention to her. It was her hair. Her face was framed by a cascading mass of curly red hair that splashed down over her shoulders. The depth of colour meant that she stood out from the rest of the background, gaining an almost three-dimensional effect that belied the perspective. 'Now who does that remind you of?' Fitz asked. Sam stared. Then frowned, her whole face seeming to scrunch up. 'Don't you think it looks like Vermilion?'

'A bit. Maybe.' Sam continued to stare. 'But I'll tell you something else.'

'Yes?'

'I looked at this picture this morning, and I don't recall seeing that figure.'

Fitz shrugged. 'It's quite small. Detail. You missed it, that's all.'

'But distinctive.'

'Like Vermilion.'

Sam nodded. 'And Cage said they couldn't find her.'

'Cage also said they hadn't really looked.' Fitz turned Sam to face him. 'I don't really think... Hell, look, it's just a painting. A bit of a coincidence. A slight resemblance.'

'I'm sure you're right.' She did not sound sure at all.

Fitz nodded. 'So am I,' he said. 'Let's get back and see if she's turned up yet.'

'And if not?'

'Then we need to find the Doctor.'

There was a man waiting in the open foyer area. He was at the railing, facing away from them looking out over the central well. He turned as Sam and Fitz emerged from the exhibition. And smiled.

Fitz instinctively smiled back. The man was familiar - heavy set and tall. Short, dark hair. Where had he seen the man before? At the casino? Yes, that would be it. The casino. Fitz had a fleeting memory of the man dressed in a dinner suit, leaning against the bar next to him. Holding a gun.

Holding a gun?

The man was holding a gun. A gun that looked like it was made of glass. He was screwing an extension of some sort on to the end of the barrel - like a silencer.

Fitz was frozen to the spot, staring at the man. Or, rather, at the man's gun. Sam was shouting something. And the man was still smiling.

Before he knew what was happening, Fitz felt himself shoved forward, towards the corridor. He caught a glimpse of Sam disappearing backward, through the door and back into the exhibition. Sam was still shouting, telling him to get a move on, to hurry, to run. Her voice was cut off as the door closed.

Fitz ran.

The man ran after him.

Sam opened the door a crack and peeped out through the gap. The mezzanine was empty - both Fitz and the man had gone. She breathed out, a long stream of air. If Fitz had the wit to keep running then he should be all right. Her best bet was to find the Doctor.

She was just pulling the door open when someone grabbed her by the shoulder. Sam began to scream, immediately stifling the noise. She continued to pull at the door, tried to squeeze through the narrow gap as the pressure on her shoulder increased. The area round the door was only dimly lit, just enough to see your way in to the exhibition. Just enough to make out the hairy paw that was latched on to Sam's shoulder, to see the claws extending from the ends of the black, shaggy

fingers. Bigdog?

There was a rip of cloth as Sam tore free, her shirt shredded and a thin line of blood welling up as she dived through the gap between door and jamb. She hit the ground heavily, was on her feet at once, hand clutched to her injured shoulder - just a scratch. She could feel the sticky blood on her fingers, could taste the fear in her mouth, could smell the memory of the creature's sticky-sweet stench close behind her as she ran for the lift.

Chapter Seven

Art Theft

That Fitz was fundamentally unfit was as much news to him as the fact that he was in serious trouble. All he could hear was the pounding of his heart and the rush of blood in his ears. His throat was burning dry with the effort.

The man could not be far behind him, he knew that. And probably the man was fitter than he was. And quicker. In fact the only edge that Fitz had was that he was absolutely terrified, and that drove the adrenaline into his system. Probably it was all that was powering his legs by now.

So, when he saw the lift door open beside him, Fitz tumbled in without really thinking about it. He hit a button - any button - and watched the doors slide slowly, agonisingly slowly, shut. He was willing them to close more quickly, to close before the man with the glass gun rounded the corner and saw where he was. If he saw him he might get off a shot. Or he might make it into the lift - with Fitz.

Then the doors were closed and Fitz breathed a sigh of relief.

Nothing happened.

It took him a while to realise, a painful few moments as he stood legs apart, head down, almost retching to get his breath back.

The lift wasn't moving.

For a long second he was afraid the man had pressed the call button and the doors were about to slide open again to reveal his smile and his gun. Fitz looked at the control panel. Was there a keep-the-doors-closed button he could press? An alarm? A break-here-for-escape-route?

Then he realised what he had done. He had jabbed at the button without really looking - had chosen the button for the floor he was already on. And the lift was waiting patiently for its next call. Fitz pressed the button for the casino level so hard it hurt his thumb. The button illuminated, and the lift lurched into motion.

The Doctor was sitting close to the bar, talking to Sam.

'What kept you?' she asked as Fitz approached. He had taken a roundabout route, to make sure he wasn't being followed. But, even so, he was surprised to see that Sam was already there.

'Sorry,' Fitz mumbled. 'Got a bit delayed.' He sat down, feeling uncomfortable. He felt as if everyone in the room was looking at him, as if any of them might pull out a gun at any moment. 'Well I've been chased half round the station by a homicidal maniac waving a glass gun and out for blood,' he said. 'Much happening with you?'

'Quite a lot, apparently,' the Doctor said. 'Yes, Sam said you'd been having fun.' He grinned. 'Good to see you didn't have too much fun.'

'Why was that man after you?' Sam asked.

Fitz wanted a cigarette. He clenched his hands together tightly on the table, hoping they would not realise just how badly he wanted one, praying they wouldn't stray to his jacket pocket. 'He was after us both.' He hoped his voice was even, level, confident. But he doubted it.

'He was after you !' Sam said. 'He ignored me. I just got lumbered with claw-paw.' She had been sitting with her arms folded so that her left hand was over her right shoulder. She lifted it as she spoke, and Fitz could see the torn T-shirt beneath, could see the bloodstains on the pale material, could make out the scratches on her skin.

'Jesus, what happened? Are you all right?'

'I'm fine. Had a run-in with Bigdog. Or one of his chums.'

The Doctor handed Fitz a glass. It was short-stemmed and wide-bellied like a brandy glass. He wasn't sure where the Doctor had plucked it from - it seemed to have appeared in his hand as if by magic. 'Now drink the liquid,' Fitz murmured. It smelled like brandy too. And it burned like it at the back of his throat. 'I didn't know they had this stuff here,' Fitz said as he sipped at it.

'They don't.' The Doctor held up a silver hip flask for a moment, then returned it to his coat pocket. 'Explorer's survival kit,' he said. 'Like matches.'

'There's still no sign of Vermilion, apparently,' Sam said. 'And there's been more sabotage.'

'Just a few minor incidents,' the Doctor explained. 'More like causing trouble for the sake of it than actually trying to do any real damage.'

'Unlike the power supply, then,' Sam offered.

'No, I think that was just an opener,' the Doctor said.

'Starter for ten?'

'Attention-seeking. It was easy enough to fix. They could have done much more damage if they'd wanted. Could have shut the place down completely and for good.' He looked from Sam to Fitz and back again. 'So, apart from being chased by strange men with strange guns, and hairy beasties with sharp claws, what have you two been up to, eh?'

'We've been doing a spot of art appreciation,' Sam said.

'Indeed?'

'Yeah,' Fitz agreed. 'And there's a painting we'd very much like you to give us an opinion about.'

She had done a good job, as he knew she would. Blanc stood at the entrance of the exhibition and stared out into the puddles of light. The effect was a receding tunnel that drew the eye towards the paintings, that made the art itself the focus of attention. Good. Very good.

'Yes,' Henri Blanc said to Tullus Gath. 'Not bad.'

'Thank you.' She led him through to the office area and poured him a drink. 'I've got you a suite at the Vega Hotel. It adjoins mine.'

He nodded. 'Convenient.'

'Your luggage should be there by now. I expect you could do with a rest, get changed. Shower.'

'When do we see the painting?'

'They know you're here. They'll make contact soon, or if they don't we can go down to their shop.'

Blanc drained his glass. 'I don't want to waste any time,' he said. 'For obvious reasons I'd like to check this out as soon as possible.'

'Of course.' She took his glass from him and set it down on the desk.

'Excuse me. The voice cut through the air just as Blanc was standing. 'I'm sorry to interrupt. Is now a good time, I wonder?'

'For what? Who are you?' Gath asked.

'Are you the man with the Martinique?' Blanc asked at the same moment.

The man who was standing in the doorway between partitions looked confused by the questions. 'Er, no. I'm with Sam and Fitz,' he said. As he spoke two more figures appeared beside him - a young woman and a young man.

'Oh,' Gath said to the woman. 'It's you.'

'Yeah. Hello again.' She stepped forward and offered Blanc her hand. 'I'm Sam, this is Fitz.' She pointed to the man who had first spoken. 'Don't mind the Doctor.'

'I won't.'

'We were hoping the exhibition would be open,' the man she called the Doctor said. He took Blanc by the shoulder and led him out into the main hall. 'I do so admire Martinson's work, you know.'

'Martinique,' Blanc corrected him, pulling free of the man's embrace.

'Of course. Martinique. May we look round?'

'I'm afraid that the exhibition is not yet open to the public,' Gath said, interposing herself between Blanc and the Doctor.

'Oh.' The Doctor looked crestfallen. 'Oh, that's a pity. I've heard so much about it. And there was one painting I was so looking forward to seeing.'

He jiggled his head from side to side so it seemed to bounce on his shoulders. 'I don't suppose we could take just a quiet sneaky look at it, could we? Just the one picture? While we're here.'

'No,' said Blanc.

'Which picture?' Gath asked.

'I think it's called, um...' The Doctor snapped his fingers several times in rapid succession, his face a mask of concentration.

'Murdering art ', Sam whispered loudly from behind him.

'Murdering art ', the Doctor said with a jab of his finger towards Gath. 'Such an interesting piece.'

'Indeed,' Blanc agreed. 'But I'm afraid -'

'Ooh.' The Doctor's feet shuffled in disappointment and he looked down at the floor. When he looked up again, he was holding his hand up, thumb and forefinger close together. 'Not even a teensy-weensy little look?'

'We can find it ourselves, if you're too busy,' Fitz offered.

'No,' Gath said quickly. She flashed a look at Blanc. Then said, 'We'll show you. But just a couple of minutes, then we really do have to ask you to leave.'

'Agreed. Oh you're so kind.' The Doctor drew 'kind' out so it lasted several seconds.

'Aren't we?' Blanc murmured as he gestured to the three visitors to follow Gath. He let them get well ahead before he too followed. Better to be out of range of any further conversation, he thought.

So he did not see what it was that caused Gath to cry out and the others to gasp out loud until he pushed past them. Murdering art was the prize piece of the exhibition - of his collection. It was Martinique's most famous, most notorious work. He stood beside Gath, and stared. He could feel her turning to look at him, but he did not turn away. He continued to stare at the frame on the wall in front of him. Apart from the security wire that had held the picture to the wall and acted as alarm -

the wire that had been neatly cut after another section was added to complete the circuit so the painting could be removed - there was nothing inside it. Just an empty frame.

The painting itself was gone.

'Remind me,' the Doctor was saying quietly to Blanc and Gath, 'just why was this painting so important?'

Blanc continued to stare at the empty frame on the wall. He could hear Gath's voice as if through water as she spoke, as she told them what everyone with even a passing interest in art must know.

'I don't know how much you know already, of course. Do tell me if I'm going too fast or too slow. The shock - I'm sorry...

'I was Martinique's personal assistant. I handled all his appointments, his accounts, his schedule. Everything. Henri here was his sponsor, and between us we managed Toulour Martinique. In many ways, we made him. Not his art, of course: that was uniquely him. But his reputation.

'And it was us who found him that morning. In his studio. You've seen the picture, of course, if only a print of it. So you will know what his studio looked like. Bare boards, roughly plastered walls, views of people in the street outside and of the hills in the distance. He liked to keep it pretty Spartan, except when he was setting up for a picture of course. Then it was like a video studio as much as an artist's.

'He was between paintings then. Or so we thought. I don't know what he was doing in the studio that night. I didn't hear him go down there. I slept on the premises, you see. We were... close. Friends. Perhaps he heard a noise - intruders. Whatever.

'We found him in the morning. Henri had an early appointment. I had overslept, but I was in the office, wondering where Toulour might be. We assumed he was already in the studio.

'And he was.

'They said it must have taken two people. One to hold him - despite his size he was quite a strong man. The other slit his throat. He was lying

there, face down. The blood was old. He had bled a lot, and several hours previously. Oh God, I can still see him lying there. And as we stared at the body, as we found him, there were children playing in the street outside, people laughing. Sunshine. It just seemed so... wrong. So heartless.

'It wasn't until later we found the picture. It was at the back of the studio, on an easel and under a dust sheet. There were some paintings stacked at the back of the studio, of course. He liked to have his art close by - it made him feel secure, I think. But this was like a work in progress, except that it was finished.

'They said that the killers must have found the painting, must have decided when they saw it how to kill him. Or it was a coincidence. But I think he knew. The paint was still wet -he'd only painted it the day before. A premonition, a dream, who knows? But however you look at it, at some level in some way, Toulour Martinique foresaw his own death. And he painted it, whether he knew that was what he was doing or not.

'And he called it Murdering art . His most famous painting. Some say his best work. The piece that everyone talks about, that everyone wants to see, that everyone remembers. Not the man, not his An. Only his death and the manner of his death.

'God, how I hate it.'

The CEO was sitting at Cage's desk in the security commander's office. One of the disadvantages of not having an office of his own - at least, not one he could use for his real work - was that he was forced to camp in other people's. The wisdom of the whole setup was something he often questioned. He had queried it when Phillips had given him the job, but he knew that Phillips hated him anyway. That was why he had been offered - given - the job in the first place, of course. And it explained the circumstances. He could still see Phillips's smug face as he handed over the file.

'Your cover,' Browning Phillips had said simply.

The CEO had not read it until later. Had not wanted Phillips to have the satisfaction of seeing his reaction, or to have been shocked into asking for a rethink. But it would not be long now, he felt. Not long at all.

'There's no doubt?' he asked Cage as she finished her report on the latest minor act of sabotage. Several vending machines and a casino chip dispenser had been ripped from the walls in a corridor close to the hotel.

'Very little. One of my men responded to the alarm. He says he saw a Canvine running off. Just a glimpse, but they're pretty distinctive.'

'How many Canvines are there on the station right now?'

'Luckily we're between tour groups, so, while there were two hundred and thirteen a couple of days ago, we're down to twenty-six right now,' Cage said grimly. 'But still enough to cause us some serious trouble.'

'But why? Why are they doing this? Why now?' The CEO shook his head. 'As if we didn't have enough to worry about at the moment.'

'We can leave the other matter to the Doctor and his associates, don't you think?'

The CEO shrugged. 'Given his reputation. He's not what I expected, though, but then I guess that's the point.' He sighed. 'All right, you'd better bring him in.'

Cage opened the door, and Bigdog was ushered in by a guard. He stood for a moment in front of the desk, and stared at the CEO. Then he grinned, his massive jaw parting slightly as he sat down. 'I'm honoured,' he rasped. 'And who are you today?'

'This is no time for flippancy,' the CEO said sharply.

Bigdog nodded. 'That answers that question then. May I ask why you've brought me here?'

'We're having some problems,' Cage said, 'as I'm sure you will have noticed.'

'Nothing to do with me.'

'Oh come on. Canvines have been seen at the crime scenes.'

'Really? Often?'

'Once,' the CEO admitted. 'A glimpse.'

Bigdog snorted with what might have been either humour or disgust. 'And even if this is the case,' he snarled, 'what is that to me?'

'Oh come on!' The CEO was beginning to lose his temper. 'I know who you are just as well as you know who I am. Nothing happens here without your knowledge, if not your agreement. What's going on, Bigdog? What's happening here?'

Bigdog leaned forward, saliva flecking his lower jaw. His paw-fist slammed down on the desk, making stylus, notepad, clock jump. 'I don't know,' he snarled emphatically. 'Why don't you tell me?'

Browning Phillips was surprised. He had expected it to be a tough job to persuade the President to go ahead with her planned trip to Vega, given the recent status report from the security force there. He had always known that this was the weak point, trouble ahead of the visit. But she seemed adamant even before he offered his own advice. She might not like him, but she did at least still ask for and respect his counsel.

He punched in the code for Gerrurd Dith and was connected at once. The comms unit at the other end would know who he was and Dith had evidently left instructions that he wished to speak to Phillips personally rather than take a message.

'Well?' Dith demanded even before his face had properly formed.

Phillips smiled. 'She's still going,' he said. 'I told you she would.'

Dith's eyes narrowed. 'Despite these latest reports?'

'Rumours,' Phillips corrected him.

'Sorry?'

'I get reports. You hear rumours. Let's not forget that, shall we?'

Dith sighed. 'If you say so. The point is, she's still going.'

'As I assured you. And with the rumours that are now circulating about the Canvines causing trouble on Vega, that can only be interpreted as a show of force, of upholding the honourable tradition of zero tolerance towards these animals.'

'That's one interpretation,' Dith conceded. 'I'm sure it's the one that the media services will favour.'

'How sure?' Phillips asked.

Dith smiled thinly. 'Several hundred thousand plaudits sure.'

Phillips nodded. 'And I hear,' he said with mock gravity, 'that these rumours are set to increase.' He shook his head sadly. 'You just can't keep anything secret these days, can you?'

'And ain't that a shame,' Dith agreed as he broke the connection.

Which left Phillips just one real worry. Why was President Drexler really so keen to go to Vega? He sighed. Perhaps she was indeed fanatical about the Martinique exhibition.

The entry chime was subtle, quiet, discreet. Everything that Rappare was not, in fact. He looked at Forster, who shrugged.

'I thought you were going to lock up,' Rappare said.

'I thought you already had.'

They were in the workshop at the back of their shop. They had intended not to be disturbed. Rappare put down the scanning-tunnelling magnifying lens he had been peering through and exhaled heavily. 'I'll go, shall I?' he said.

Forster made no response.

'Right,' Rappare said in resignation. 'You see if you can sort out the dating. We want to be spot on and this will give us a later limit at least. Though I guess we could just ask them when exactly he died.' He negotiated the narrow path to the door.

There was a man standing in the shop, apparently engrossed in a pile of manuscripts that wobbled beside the main path through the mess.

'I'm afraid we're closed,' Rappare smarmed. 'But if there is something in particular that sir is interested in that I can quickly handle?' He waited a moment. 'Otherwise, perhaps sir could call back a little later. When we're less busy.'

The man looked up. He was an odd one, Rappare thought. The man was shorter than Rappare, dressed in a long coat that looked like oilskin or some wet-look plastic compound. In his hand he held what looked like a silk handkerchief with which he dabbed at his glistening forehead. Not that much of it was visible under that wide-brimmed hat. The man's face was almost hidden in the shadow. Rappare took a step closer, trying to make out the man's face. It looked as though he had a thick foundation cream on, which was cracking slightly round his eyes and mouth.

Rappare had nearly reached him before the man answered. His voice was almost mellow, with a slightly sing-song inflection. Casual, but a little diffident. 'I'm so sorry,' the man said. 'I was just browsing.' He looked as if he was about to smile, then seemed to think better of it. He dabbed gently at his forehead again. 'These are interesting,' he said pointing to the manuscripts. 'Early Ethanoan, am I right?'

Rappare glanced down at them. 'Yes,' he said. 'That's right.' He told the man the price.

'Oh, I'm not interested in buying them,' the man said hurriedly. 'Do excuse me, please. I've taken up enough of your time already. Good of you to see me at all. Thank you.'

Rappare walked him back to the door. There was a slight odour in the room, he noticed - maybe the air conditioning was playing up again. All the dust, the engineer had said last time... 'I could perhaps go a little lower for the manuscripts, if you're interested,' he offered.

'Oh no. Really, no. Thank you.' The man nodded his goodbye to Rappare at the doorway. 'I'm not interested, I'm afraid,' he confessed. 'Not in copies '.

Rappare watched the man as he made his way down the corridor. He stood in the doorway of his shop, one hand on the small button that would flip the sign from OPEN to CLOSED. His mouth was open in a

gape of astonishment.

Solarin had changed his mind. They were not professionals. Not the two younger ones, anyway. He watched the three of them across the casino. The older man, possibly. He seemed more in control, more self-confident. There was an air to him, an attitude, which made Solarin wary of him.

But the other two... The fact that he was sitting within fifty feet of them disguised only by a change of jacket and a false beard was sufficient to tell him they were not in the same business as he was, let alone the same league.

He sipped at a glass of water, watching as Cassey Cage came into the casino. She looked round, then crossed to where the three people he had been watching were seated. So, they were in with the authorities. Working with them, perhaps, on something. That made things more puzzling. Or more interesting, depending which side of the coin you looked at.

The three of them stood up as Cage spoke to them, then followed her out of the casino, back towards the hotel. Solarin made no effort to follow. He knew the extent of the team working against him now. It only remained to decide what to do about them.

The area was cordoned off with yellow-and-black-striped tape. One of Cage's guards stood on duty beside it, ushering the interested people on as they paused and looked and tutted and muttered.

Cage led the Doctor, Fitz and Sam through a narrow gap between tape and wall. The Doctor immediately went to the nearest of the wrecked machines. It had been, Cage explained, a dispenser where clients could pay in money or a credit chip and get back a chip for the casino preloaded with the number of plaudits they put in. Less the Vega Central Bank's commission, of course. It was up to the customer to DNA-encode the chip so it could not be stolen or used by someone else. Until or unless they reassigned it to another person or to the bank.

There was a line of similar machines. They had once been fixed to the

corridor wall. But now they lay where they had fallen, or rather where they had been thrown after being wrenched from their fixings.

'These are heavy things,' the Doctor said as he looked them over. 'And well secured by the look of it.'

'So?' asked Fitz.

'So it would take someone of considerable strength to pull it off the wall like this.'

'And then go on and do it several times more,' Sam pointed out.

The Doctor nodded. He leaned the broken and dented machine forward and examined the back. 'Bolts sheared clean off,' he said. As he tilted it back, he paused, balancing on its edge. 'Now that's interesting. Wouldn't you say?'

'What?' demanded Cage.

'Paint:

'What?'

They all crowded round to see as the Doctor angled the heavy machine so that the light caught the corner he was indicating. 'Oil paint, at a guess. Dark-brown. Possibly black or grey. Not much of it, just a fleck.' He dabbed at it with a finger, then put the finger to his nose and sniffed gently, rubbing finger and thumb together.

'Probably been there for years,' Fitz said as he straightened up.

'I don't think so,' the Doctor said slowly. 'It's still damp.' He held his finger up for Fitz to smell. But Fitz declined.

'But how does that help us?' Cage asked. 'What does it mean?'

'I don't know,' the Doctor confessed.

'The art exhibition?' Sam asked.

'They're old paintings. Dry and unpleasant, not wet,' Fitz pointed out.

'Newark Rappare is a painter,' Cage said. 'Does that help at all?'

Rappare was muttering under his breath when he came back into the studio. 'I need to work on my Ethanoan manuscripts a bit more,' he told Forster.

'Really?' Forster set down the instrument he had been using to calibrate the date of the paintwork. 'I thought they were perfect.'

Rappare leaned over the painting. 'So did I,' he said glumly. 'But apparently not.' Still, first things first. 'Have you made any progress with this?'

Forster pulled the painting from under Rappare's nose and spread it out over the arms of his wheelchair, rolling it carefully so as not to crack the old paint. 'Yes. The foundation layers are a couple of days older than the overlying detail,' he said. 'Pretty much as you would expect. Painted quite quickly. The scanning techniques give some of the readouts a headache, though. But basically it was painted seven years, three months and eleven days ago.'

Rappare nodded, looking over his partner's shoulder at Martinique's most famous work of art.

'He went about things in an odd order,' Forster commented. 'The masks here, some of the detailing on these two figures, they were added later. Just a few hours, but it may have been a late decision. An afterthought. Also the area round the title of the piece.'

Rappare patted Forster's shoulder. 'Well done,' he said. 'That will give us a good idea of how to build things up. Not bad if the instruments really are playing up.'

'There's just one area they seemed not to like, that's why I thought it might be to do with the technique. The rest of it's fine.' He pointed to a figure just visible through one of the windows in the studio. 'This female figure.'

'What about her?' Rappare peered at the canvas. She was a striking young woman with lots of deep-red hair. She seemed to be screaming, though he couldn't see what at. 'So?'

'So the instruments seem to think that, while the painting itself is over seven years old, she was added to it just a few hours ago.'

Chapter Eight

Target Identified

The room virtually ran itself. Even so, there had to be someone monitoring the logs, analysing the readouts, running the diagnostics. Not the whole time, of course: the operators worked to a schedule that was far from demanding. After all, there was only a slight chance that there would be a war.

But that slight chance was why the room existed at all.

The monitoring equipment kept watch day and night -although the concepts meant nothing to it. It never slept, never stopped, never let up. The surveillance was extensive and comprehensive. Every movement in the buffer zone was noted and recorded; every stray space fragment bigger than a man's fist was coded, tracked, watched. Today just as every other day - every other hour, minute, second - since the room was built.

The duty operators sat at the logging consoles and replayed the previous hours' events at greatly increased speed. Their practised eyes eliminated tracks that the computer had no way of designating as either natural or hostile. The only artificial entity that was tolerated in the surveyed area was Bigdog's ship. And that was in port at Vega.

"There's a forty-second gap." Teague Andrell pointed to the flat line on his monitor. 'Again.'

Hal Glimp swung his chair so he could see what his colleague was pointing at. 'A sensor went down,' he said. "The system compensated and the readings cut back in forty seconds later." He went back to what he had been doing. 'Nothing too unusual in that.'

Andrell was not convinced. 'Nothing in the diagnostics.'

Glimp sighed. Andrell was pretty new to the job. He saw an invasion hiding behind every meteor shower, a spy snip in every solar flare. 'So the sensor knocked out diagnostics when it went. Or they're up the creek anyway. Maybe the power failure had an impact.'

'No. The power failure registered later.'

Andrell shook his head. 'It's happened before,' he said. 'Like the log just stops for a while. Maybe someone took it out.'

'Why? Who?' Glimp was getting ratty. 'Look, if it's happened before, then there's some intermittent fault, all right?'

'We should find it and fix it then.'

'Not our job.'

'But-'

Glimp swung round to face Andrell. 'Are we being invaded?' he demanded. 'Is there any indication at all of activity in or close to the buffer zone.'

'No, sir.'

'Well then. Ignore it.'

'Yes, sir.' Andrell sounded annoyed too now.

'Just let me know if we have a problem. A real problem. All right?'

Andrell did not answer. Partly this was because he had nothing to say. And partly it was because at this moment the door was smashed open.

He barely had time to acknowledge the sound before he was hurled across the room. The door was swinging on its frame, sagging, falling with a tearing, ripping cry of breaking metal. The wood cladding on the corridor side was splintered and broken.

Glimp was sitting further from the door, and they took a few moments longer to get to him. He was rising, pushing the chair back, reaching for the comms button on the console beside him as a massive hairy paw smashed him aside. His head cracked against the wall above a low console and he fell.

Andrell was trying to stand up again, trying to see a way through the creatures to the corridor. If he could just make it to the corridor, he reasoned illogically, he would be safe. But the clawed hands were reaching down at him even as he tried to burrow through the mass of hair and get away. He was jerked upright, bent backwards, then hurled

across the room towards where Glimp's body lay. A problem, he thought as he saw the wall crashing towards him. Yes, they had a problem all right.

Then his head connected with the metal wall, and he felt the jolt rip through his neck, shimmer down his spine, saw the floor rushing up to meet him, and heard the guttural snarl of the creatures as they closed in round him.

'Nobody at home.' Sam pointed to the CLOSED sign. Beyond it, the shop was in near darkness. 'I don't know how they can make a living if they never open.'

'Let's ask them, shall we?' the Doctor suggested with a grin.

They had left Fitz with Cage examining the damaged vending machines while they paid the antiques shop a visit.

'How can we, if they're not here?'

'Oh they're here all right .'The Doctor tapped in the glass of the door, pointing to a line of light at the back of the room. 'Out the back.' He tried the door. It was locked.

'Break in?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I think they might notice, don't you? Let's be a bit more subtle than that.' So saying, he started to thump on the door, rapping on the glass with his knuckles.

'Steady on,' Sam cautioned. 'You'll break it.'

The Doctor frowned at her. 'Break heavy-duty plastiglass? I don't think so.' He resumed his assault on the door, shouting loudly as he did so: 'Come on, come on. We know you're in there. Put that brush down.'

'You know,' Sam told him as he paused for breath and to peer into the shop for signs of some success, 'your idea of subtlety and mine are worlds apart.'

'Ah, but it's results that count.' He pointed to the back of the shop, where

Sam could just make out the line of light widening and spilling out as the door was opened. Then it was blotted out again, by the ample form of Newark Rappare as he bumbled his way towards them.

'Oh. It's you,' he said without enthusiasm as he opened the door. 'We're shut.' To reinforce the point, he closed the door again.

It connected with the Doctor's foot. 'Don't worry, we'll only be a moment.' The Doctor pushed the door open and squeezed through, holding it open for Sam to follow. He grinned at Rappare. 'May we come in?'

'You are in,' he pointed out sullenly.

The Doctor looked round, as if noticing for the first time where he was. 'How kind,' he murmured. 'How very kind.'

Cage stood in the doorway. The room was devastated. Mangled equipment lay shattered across the floor, fa among the mess of wires and ripped panels, the bodies of the two operators were just visible - an arm poking out here, a glimpse of uniform there.

She shook her head in disbelief.

How anyone could work in such a cluttered, dusty, disorganised environment Sam could not begin to understand. It was worse than the TARDIS, and that was saying something. There were piles of papers and books all over the place. Half-finished sculptures and paintings stood around, sometimes under dust sheets, sometimes not. Sometimes the dust sheets lay in tangled piles where they had fallen. Every spare wall was shelved, and the shelves were crammed with books and journals, with others jammed in sideways above them.

Forster and Rappare were together, the other side of a large table. The top of the table was as cluttered as the floor, only its elevation from the ground making it seem any different at all. Across the top of the clutter lay a dust sheet, under which Sam could see a large rectangular shape. The way that Rappare and Forster kept making a point of not glancing down at it made her want to peek under the sheet. But she let the Doctor make the running. No doubt he had noticed how uneasy they were as

well.

'How long?' he was asking.

'Hours. I don't know.' Rappare looked at Forster in frustration. 'When did we get back from the casino?'

'I have no idea. As you say, hours ago.' Forster turned to the Doctor. 'And we have not left the shop since.'

'What are you doing here?' Sam asked. 'I mean, you're not open, so why are you here at all?'

They did not answer.

'Stocktaking?' the Doctor hazarded.

'Indeed,' Rappare said at once. 'Indeed, that's right. And, er...' He looked round, and bit his bottom lip. 'Fj, tidying up a bit.'

The Doctor nodded understandingly. 'So I see,' he said as they surveyed the mess and the dust. 'So I see.'

The awkward silence that followed was broken by the buzz of the communicator. For a second nobody moved. Then there was a general scramble as the Doctor went to lift the dust sheet on the table, and Rappare and Forster both immediately held it down.

'No, no,' Forster said quickly. 'It's over there on the table by the door.'

The Doctor turned to look.

'Or did I put it on the floor?' Rappare said with a frown.

The sound was insistent, and growing in volume. They spent a few more moments scrambling about, searching through the mess. Then the Doctor reached down the side of Forster's wheelchair, sparing him an apologetic smile, and drawing out the communicator handset.

'Ah,' Forster said. 'Of course.' He snatched it from the Doctor. 'Thank you so much.' His voice was quiet as he answered rapidly. 'Rappare-Forster Antiques and Curios -how can I help you?'

Forster's professional smile froze as a voice answered, 'Yes, can I speak to the Doctor, please?'

'May I?' The Doctor was all charm and deference as he took the handset. His good humour did not survive the call, however. 'Come on,' he said to Sam as soon as they had heard what had happened. 'Do excuse us, won't you?'

'Of course,' Rappare said as they rushed out. 'Don't hurry back on our account.' Had Sam been in less of a hurry as she followed the Doctor, she might have noticed the thoughtful tone that had crept into Rappare's voice. Had she glanced back, she might have seen the way he and Forster were looking at each other.

Gath and Blanc were talking in low voices, discussing their options without their prize painting. The lights were subdued, playing eerily over the paintings, giving an illusion of movement where there was none.

As they spoke, the door slowly swung open, allowing light from outside to enter and dispel some of the deeper shadows near the front of the exhibition. Gath and Blanc both turned, both took an instinctive step backward as they saw the creatures crowded into the doorway. At the front of the small group stood a massive dark figure, skin glistening as if wet. Its legs were shaggy, ending in heavy cloven hooves, but above the waist the body was that of a man. Its chest was matted with hair, saliva dripping on to it from the huge goat head above. Horns curled up from the creature's head, pointed ears swept back beside them. A long tongue licked over sharp teeth as it stepped into the room.

Behind the goat creature were others. One was a mass of shaggy hair and fur, teeth jutting from a long snout. Its massive paws ended in long, sharp claws that even in the dim light were stained and ragged. Beside this creature, a bearlike monster crouched on all fours, fangs erupting from its mouth and red eyes glinting malevolently through dark fur.

Blanc and Gath had stopped talking, and watched in transfixed fascination as the creatures pushed their way into the exhibition hall.

'I take it the door was built with an eye more for concealment than for

strength.' The Doctor was standing in the middle of the debris. He seemed to have found the one clear piece of floor, and the effect was that it looked as if the devastation had taken place around him. Fitz was reminded of an old movie gag - everything collapsing on to the hapless hero, but miraculously missing him as windows fell over his head and beams collapsed at his feet. But the destruction here was long past.

A couple of medics had carried out the two bodies soon after the Doctor and Sam had joined Fitz at the scene. Fitz had craned forward to see even as Sam, more experienced in such things, shrank back and looked away. Fitz would know for next time.

But now what intrigued him was the technology. Sure, he had seen the communicators Cage's people used, the handsets in the hotel room. Even the audio-visual entertainment system and the Vega guide book were all far beyond his previous experiences.

But just as the alien technology that made Azoth, or that lurked in the Benelisans' cave under London, had not prepared him for Vega, so the general technology of Vega had not prepared him for the miniaturisation, the sheer amount of elegant machinery, that could be crammed into this small room. Even devastated, ripped up and thrown down, this, he could tell, was no tape-spool clockwork-and-brass affair from Jules Verne, or even This Island Earth . As with the tracker he had been given, this stuff left Fitz seriously out of his depth.

As he fingered the tracking device in his jacket pocket, feeling its cool, smooth surface, Fitz watched the Doctor make his way slowly round the shattered room.

'What was this place?' Sam asked. It had not occurred to Fitz to ask that - he was too preoccupied with form to worry about function.

Cage said nothing for a while, watching the Doctor's apparent meanderings as broken equipment and fixings crunched under his feet. Then she seemed to realise that Sam was looking at her, expecting an answer. 'Observation station,' she said. 'Surveillance, you know.'

'That's obvious from the equipment,' the Doctor said from the other side of the room, and Fitz felt a little better for not asking. He nodded at Sam, hoping she thought he had known. Knowing she didn't.

'The question is,' the Doctor went on, 'observing what? Eh?'

'The question is,' Cage countered, 'why was this done?'

The Doctor's tour of the room had brought him back to the doorway, to a point where his nose was close to Cage's. 'If you told us what this place was for,' he said quietly, 'then perhaps we could work that out.'

But, before Cage could answer, the Doctor suddenly leaned forward, reaching past her and tapping the door frame. 'Here it is again, look.'

Cage, Fitz and Sam all turned to look. The Doctor was rubbing his index finger over a section of the door frame. It was torn and splintered, ragged and rough. And just by his finger they could all see a smear of what looked like paint.

'Coincidence?' Fitz asked.

The Doctor gave a short laugh, barely more than a sniff. 'I've noticed three other smears of what looks like paint throughout the room. How many coincidences do you want?'

'One is too many,' Cage said.

'I agree.' The Doctor straightened up. 'Now, about this room.'

Cage sighed. 'As I said, it's an observation post. A security control room, if you like. We monitor Vega from here, keep an eye out for trouble.'

The Doctor nodded in apparent appreciation. 'Pretty sophisticated stuff for that sort of thing. I doubt you'd miss much with this lot.'

Cage was into her stride now. 'Oh it's efficient enough. There's practically never any trouble here. We can check that there's no violence, robbery, shoplifting -'

'Cheating at cards?' Sam suggested.

'Stolen paintings?' the Doctor asked.

'Murder,' Fitz said quietly.

Cage said nothing. She was saved from further comment by the arrival of one of her security guards.

'We've found something you should see,' he said simply.

'More sabotage?' Cage asked, sounding resigned.

'No. I think it's a painting.'

The Doctor stared at the picture for what seemed like an age. It had been left, apparently abandoned, in an alcove. One of the guards had spotted it rolled up and leaning against the back wall, in the shadows.

'You're right.' The Doctor nodded. 'It's really quite grotesque. I wonder how it got here.'

'Is it the painting missing from the exhibition?' Cage queried.

'Oh yes. I doubt there could be two like this.'

'Maybe whoever stole it was passing by when whatever it was that happened...' Fitz's voice tailed off as he searched for a word. 'Fj, happened.'

'Maybe.' The Doctor did not sound as if he accepted the theory.

'How else could it have got here?' Sam asked.

'Well, someone left it here. But I wonder why.'

'At least we've got it back.' Cage seemed happy to dismiss the whole thing as solved. 'I need to get a technical crew to look over the damage in there.' She jerked her thumb back down the corridor towards the concealed room. 'To see what can be salvaged.'

'Hmm.' The Doctor was still contemplating the painting. 'We'll return this to its owners. At least we can set their minds at rest, and I wouldn't mind a word.'

As soon as Cage had gone, Sam pointed to the figure in the background of the picture. 'There, Doctor. What do you think?'

The three of them leaned close over the painting. The Doctor was sitting

cross-legged on the floor with it over his knees, Fitz and Sam peered over each of his shoulders. 'Well,' he said at last, 'it's rather difficult to tell. There's certainly a resemblance, but nothing conclusive.' He smiled brightly and leapt to his feet. Sam and Fitz ducked out of the way just in time to avoid having their chins snapped upward by his shoulders. 'Let's ask the experts.'

'I think I'll wait here, if you don't mind.' Fitz shuffled uncomfortably.

'Of course. If you wish.'

'The paintings worried you that much, did they?' Sam asked.

'No, I've got some technical questions, that's all.'

Sam looked at Fitz. He looked away.

'Fine,' said the Doctor. 'Sam and I can handle it. Can't we, Sam?'

The exhibition hall seemed to be in total darkness. There was no light, no sound. The Doctor stepped forward into the darkness, the painting under his arm. He called out, 'Hello. Anyone there?'

There was no answer.

Sam followed him in. 'There are lights here somewhere,' she said fumbling round the door frame, feeling for the switch.

Suddenly the vast room was bathed in harsh white light. Whereas the usual lighting picked out the paintings and displays, focused the attention on the exhibits, this showed up the room as what it was - a huge, empty space with a high ceiling. A ribbon of carpet wound its way past the display stands on which the paintings were mounted. They seemed almost lost in the wide, open space created by the light.

'Well done, Sam.'

Sam gulped, her hand frozen against the wall. 'It wasn't me, Doctor.'

'Ah,' said the Doctor.

'Can I help you?' The voice came from close to them, away to the side of the door. From the office area. Henri Blanc was standing by a display stand, watching the Doctor and Sam.

'Were you sitting in the dark?' the Doctor demanded.

'I had the desk light on. What do you want?'

The Doctor smiled. 'I wanted to return this.' He held out the painting.

Immediately Blanc's demeanour changed. He reached out and took the painting from the Doctor, lifting it gently, carefully. Tullus, Tullus come here!' he shouted over his shoulder as he unrolled the painting and held it up to inspect it. 'It's not damaged,' he breathed. "Thank goodness for that.'

In a moment Gath was at his side, running her fingers over the painting's surface, examining every detail.

'Thank you,' Blanc said to the Doctor and Sam. "Thank you so much.'

'Where was it?' Gath asked. 'Who had it?'

'What does that matter?' Blanc snapped. 'We have it back now.' He held it in front of him, arms outstretched, and carried it through the hall towards the far wall, back to its place. 'We have it back,' he repeated. 'So much to do. So many things. Reframe this for a start.'

'Um... 'The Doctor said. 'Er... Actually...'

'Thank you so much, Doctor.' Gath barely looked at them as she followed Blanc. "Thank you.' Her voice was all but swallowed up by the harsh light and canvas.'

'Good deed of the day?' Sam said. 'Take the gratitude and run?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Yes. I think that's about all we'll get out of them for the moment.'

Fitz waited while the technicians sorted through the remains of the equipment. He watched as they shook their heads, listened as they

tutted and clicked their tongues in exasperation. He made vague sympathetic noises from time to time, and raised an eyebrow now and then to show he was on the ball. In between that, he glanced furtively at the door, checking that a man with a gun wasn't standing there, waiting for him. Fitz needed to get things sorted out, and he needed to do it fast. While he was still alive.

Eventually he decided that they had reached the point where a little distraction would be possible if not welcome. He drew the tracking device from his pocket and tossed it from hand to hand, making sure one of the technicians saw it.

'Was that in here?' the technician asked. She was younger than Fitz. Shorter as well. And more attractive, too, he decided.

'Oh no,' he said. 'It's mine.' He smiled. 'Can't get it to work, though. I think a whatsit may have - you know.' He gave a short laugh.

The woman looked for a moment as if she would leave it at that and go back to whatever it was she was doing.

'Got me flummoxed,' Fitz admitted.

'Tracker?' the woman asked. 'Looks like a Stenson mark six. Usually the cyclic path limiter.' She held out her hand. 'Let's have a look;

Trying not to seem too grateful or enthusiastic, Fitz handed it over. 'Why not?' he said. 'You never know. Fresh pair of eyes.'

She studied for a moment, apparently not noticing how close Fitz's face was to her hands, how attentively he was watching what she did. After a while she looked up. 'Nothing wrong with this.'

'You fixed it?' He sounded delighted. 'Show me, please.'

The technician regarded him suspiciously. Then she held out the egglike device so he could see. She pushed her thumb into an indentation on the side, then slid back a section of the 'shell'. Beneath was a small readout screen. It showed an arrow pointing towards the wall, and a number. The number changed constantly as they watched, counting down: 566... 565... 564...

'See,' she said. 'No problem. What's it keyed to?'

'Oh nothing,' Fitz said quickly. 'Well, a friend of mine. Just while I tried to get it to work. You know.'

'Well,' the technician said. 'Your friend is that way.' She pointed in the direction of the arrow. 'And five hundred and forty-seven metres away. Getting closer all the time.'

'Thanks.' Fitz took the device back. That was worrying. Seriously worrying. He had been counting on the target never actually arriving on Vega. Bugger.

The technician saw his expression. 'Don't worry about it,' she said laughing. 'They're temperamental old things. If it packs up again give it a good thump against the wall.'

Fitz held the device in front of him, cupped in his hands as if he were carrying a full glass of precious liquid. 'Mmm,' he said. 'This and my head both.'

There was a sort of hypnotic quality to it. Once he started following the arrow, bringing the numbers down ever closer to zero he could not stop. Fitz found himself walking more quickly along the corridor, through the hotel lobby, out into Vega itself.

246... 245... 244...

Round a corner, along another corridor. Would the device register if he was on the right floor? he wondered. Probably the arrow would point up or down.

87...86... 85...

Almost there now. He had no idea what he would do when he found whoever his target was. But, if he saw him, then that was progress of a sort, surely.

As he rounded another corner, Fitz cannoned straight into someone. 'Sorry,' he said without looking up.

'No problem.'

He continued along the corridor, aware of people stepping aside for him

as he went.

8...9... 10...

Hang on. The wrong way. He had passed the target.

Fitz turned, and realised that the Doctor and Sam were standing watching him. It was Sam, he now realised, that he had walked into.

'What are you doing?' Sam asked.

6...5...4...

'Oh, er. Nothing.'

'Looking for something?' the Doctor asked.

3...2... 1...

That couldn't be right. He shook the tracker impatiently. As he did so, the Doctor took a step closer. The tracker brushed against the Doctor's pocket.

0

And what sounded like an alarm clock went off. Fitz shrieked, and tossed the tracker up into the air in surprise.

The Doctor caught it in his left hand, and flicked off the proximity alarm. 'Could I perhaps have a word?' he asked, quietly.

'Only if I can have a drink,' Fitz said. He looked at Sam. 'And a smoke.'

'At last.' Solarin's voice was impatient.

'I called as soon as I got your message.' The other voice was deep, slightly husky.

'I think we may have a problem.' The dice clicked in Solarin's hand. "This may seem rather unconventional, but I think we should see each other.'

A pause. Then the voice at the other end of the comms link said, 'I thought we already had.'

'All the more reason.' Solarin thumbed the remote for the audiovisual system. 'On visual'; he said. An image appeared on the screen, a face. Solarin nodded. 'I should have guessed, I suppose.'

His contact was silent for a while. 'You're not the man I met in the Casino, but I expected that. I assumed that was your associate.'

'I work alone.' Solarin's voice had an edge to it now. 'You should know that.'

'So, the operation is compromised. But at least we know who by.'

'Yes, the arrogant young man with the strange dress sense. His colleagues are -'

'The Doctor and Samantha Jones. The young man's name is Fitz.' There was a gruff laugh from the AV console. 'I know. We are acquainted. Slightly.'

'So what do you suggest?'

Solarin's employer considered. 'Your primary mission has to be the President. That is paramount. The other matter I had hoped you might help us with can wait. It has waited long enough already.'

'And this Fitz and his friends?'

'Oh, I'll let you use your own judgement there, I think.'

Sam made a point of trying not to cough. Fitz seemed to notice, and blew the cigarette smoke in the opposite direction.

The casino was never empty, but right now it was relatively quiet. A few punters were trying their luck at something akin to chemin de fer, and the roulette wheel was spinning noisily to a mixture of gasps of joy and cries of anguish.

Harris Stabilo had just arrived and was making the rounds, joining his

clientele at tables, or at the bar or the gaming tables and inquiring politely as to their health and general demeanour. He had paused at the table in the corner where the Doctor, Sam and Fitz were seated, and frowned emphatically at Fitz as he blew out an imperfect smoke ring.

'It's a stress remedy,' the Doctor explained quietly. A little unconventional, but it seems to calm him down.'

'Oh good. Good.' Stabilo dry-washed his hands at them, nodding enthusiastically. 'I'm all in favour of that. Can I get you anything? More drinks, perhaps?'

'We're fine. Thank you,' Sam told him, and Stabilo bowed and nodded and smarmed on to the next table, where he spared the couple playing cards a nod and a word before heading off towards the hotel.

'So,' said Sam when Stabilo was out of earshot, 'let me see if I got this right.'

Fitz looked at her through the smoke haze. His eyes were begging for sympathy, but he wasn't going to get any.

'You just accidentally got yourself contracted to kill some guy you've never met?'

'I didn't know that was going to happen, for Christ's sake. I just sort of, well, went along with it.'

'Oh, that's all right, then.' Sam let the sarcasm soak in a bit, then went on. 'This man in make-up and weird clothes gave you some sort of tracking device to lead you to the guy you're supposed to kill, and it just happened to track down the Doctor.' She leaned back. 'Is that about it?'

'I didn't know it was the Doctor,' Fitz pleaded. 'Well, it isn't the Doctor. The tracker thing must be up the creek.'

'Why do you say that?' the Doctor asked.

'They gave me a picture. A sort of photo,' Fitz explained. 'But don't worry, it looks nothing like you.' He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the crumpled envelope he had been given. 'Anyway, who would want to kill you?'

'You'd be surprised,' the Doctor said as he took the envelope. 'I often am.' He up-ended the envelope and let the picture slide out on to the table. It stuck in a patch of spilt beer, facing the Doctor. It showed a tall man wearing a wide-brimmed felt hat and a long dark coat. A multicoloured scarf was wound round his neck several times, and the space between scarf and hat seemed to be almost entirely occupied by huge tombstone teeth, big nose and golf-ball eyes. Brown curly hair was apparently trying to push the hat off the man's head as it escaped from beneath. The Doctor regarded the picture with a look of resignation, nodding slowly, finger to the side of his mouth.

'You see,' Fitz said, pulling on his cigarette.

'Yes,' the Doctor said quietly. 'Yes, that's me all right.' He grinned at his friends. 'A long time ago. I'm not surprised you didn't recognise me.'

Fitz gaped. 'You're kidding.'

Nobody said anything for a while. Sam and Fitz looked at the Doctor. The Doctor looked at the picture.

'He's not kidding,' Sam concluded at last.

'So now we know the who ', the Doctor said. "That just leaves the why .'

'I guess they were lucky they had a hit man just sitting around waiting for an assignment,' Sam said.

'Hit men don't just wait around,' the Doctor said thoughtfully. 'Maybe he was already engaged on another assignment.'

'Just luck, then?' Fitz asked.

The Doctor shrugged. 'I wonder why he was here. Is here. Something to do with the problems they've been having?'

'Sabotage, mayhem, stolen paintings and card sharps.' Sam nodded. 'Could be. Or,' she added, 'maybe it's something to do with the President's visit.' She caught sight of the Doctor's expression and smiled apologetically. 'You never know.'

The Doctor was sitting with his mouth open, staring at her.

'The President of Battrul is coming here?' he asked. 'Soon?'

'Er, yes. I think so. She's going to the Martinique exhibition, among other things.'

The Doctor was frowning hard. 'I wonder if it's too late to stop her,' he said.

The CEO bowed deferentially. 'Madam President, an honour to welcome you to Vega.' He spared Browning Phillips a curt nod. 'I think we have everything prepared to ensure that your visit is valuable and entertaining, and, above all, safe.'

Chapter Nine

Behind the Scenes at the Gallery

The office area was dark apart from the light from the terminal on Gath's desk. Blanc was sprawled in a chair watching as she entered the details.

'Anyone else?'

Blanc counted off the guests on his fingers. "The President, of course, and her entourage.'

'Phillips,' Gath said.

'Yes, Phillips. And his security team. Is she bringing that dreadful husband of hers?'

'I believe not.'

Blanc grunted. 'Pity. Then there are the local dignitaries,' he continued. 'Cy Slavich from the Vega Central Bank, though I gather he's unlikely to turn up. The security chief, that idiot Stabilo from the hotel and casino.' He went through several more names, counting them off by folding down his fingers. 'And Caruso,' he finished. 'I suppose we have to invite Bigdog.'

'You think that might be a problem?'

Blanc shook his head. 'I doubt he'll cause trouble. They say that he's rather more mellow these days than he used to be. Now, who else?'

'Rappare and Forster.'

'Indeed.' Blanc swung himself round so he was facing Gath. 'Do you think they really have the picture?'

She thought for a moment. 'Why would they lie? They're a bit cagey about letting us see it, that's all. They'll come through.' She smiled, the expression emphasised by the light from the terminal, which deepened the lines and creases that appeared on her face. 'Worried?'

Blanc stared at her. 'Of course I'm worried. And so should you be.' He was breathing heavily. 'We need to keep our voices down. Just in case.'

He leapt to his feet, pacing up and down in front of the desk. 'I'm not going to let that old bastard stop us now, though. We're too close.'

'I doubt there's anything in it,' Gath said quietly. 'But I agree, it's as well to be cautious.' She returned her attention to the screen. 'OK, I've sent those. Anyone else we need to invite to the Presidential reception? Those jokers who recovered the picture, maybe?'

Blanc frowned. 'Or maybe not,' he said.

The pending-mail alert flashed in the corner of the screen, waiting for acknowledgement. Bigdog glared at it for a moment, then stabbed at a button on his console with a claw. Immediately a list of unopened mail swam into view. Most of them he was deliberately ignoring, but the topmost message was new.

Bigdog's apartment was spotlessly clean and clinically tidy. Anyone who knew him, knew his reputation, would have been surprised. But that was the way Bigdog liked things - clean, tidy and not at all what people would expect.

This too was unexpected. An invitation to attend a Presidential reception to celebrate the opening of the Martinique Experience. He scanned through the few lines of the invitation. Interesting. Interesting that there was to be a reception, and interesting that they had invited him. But should he go? What message would that be perceived as sending - both here on Vega and back home on Canvine? Bigdog scratched at his hairy jaw with a long claw, and considered his options.

The safest course of action seemed to be to leave Fitz in his hotel room. It was apparent that the real hit man had taken umbrage, and it was quite possible that Fitz would again be the target of his destructive affections. And there was the question of Fitz's employers', who might soon be after him to discover why their contract had not been fulfilled. Hanging around in the casino was, it was decided, asking for trouble.

Meanwhile the Doctor was keen to discover where the picture of him had come from.

'It looks like you're in the casino,' Fitz pointed out during a brief conference in his room. He jabbed a finger at the carpet visible beneath the earlier Doctor's booted feet. The shot was a high angle, so the floor was clearly visible. "The carpet pattern's the same, but a bit clearer.'

'The carpet was newer then.'

'Doctor,' Sam said, 'you mentioned you'd been here before. Did you look like this?'

The Doctor nodded. 'It was quite a while ago as far as I'm concerned. I'm not sure exactly how long ago in local elapsed time. Fifty years at least.'

'But long enough for the carpet to fade.'

'Obviously. I think it was just after the war. Soon after they opened Vega. I was hoping to return soon after, but the old girl's not being very co-operative just now.' A faraway look crept into his eyes. Just for a moment, then he grinned. 'I remember I was lucky at cards.'

Fitz gave a short laugh. 'And unlucky in -' he said. Then he broke off, catching sight of Sam's glare. 'Won big time, eh?' he asked.

'Oh yes. Like this time,' the Doctor was not serious. 'Pocket money, that's all. Well, nothing spectacular anyway.' He paused, considering. 'Actually,' he admitted at last, 'it was quite a lot .' A grin spread across his face. 'I'm a demon at backgammon, you know. Once, against Kublai Khan -'

But Sam cut into his reminiscences. 'So what else can we learn from this?' she asked. 'Apart from the fact that somebody has a long memory and a bit of a grudge.'

'Why not ask the experts?' Fitz suggested. "The antiques people, you know. Laurel and Hardy, Sam calls them.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'A good idea, but they may be implicated. They've been here for a long time by all accounts, though I don't recall... They could be older than they look,' he observed. 'It happens.'

'Good point.'

'Could the man who contacted you have been Rappare?' Sam asked

Fitz.

'I don't think so,' he said. 'Not unless the spare tyre he packs is padding he can take off. But anything's possible. Could be a mate of theirs, I guess.'

'There is an alternative.' The Doctor was staring off into space, his voice quiet, contemplative.

'What's that?'

He seemed to focus on Fitz and Sam again at this. "Tullus Gath and Henri Blanc are experts on pictures. Maybe they can tell us something about this," he said, picking up the picture and waving it like a flimsy peace treaty.

Blanc took a quick look at the picture and passed it straight on to Gath. 'You're the expert. What do you make of this?'

She examined it for a moment, placing it on her desk beneath the halogen lamp and leaning forward to see it clearly. 'It's old,' she said. 'At least, the print is new but the source from which it was captured is old.'

'Can you tell what the source was?' the Doctor asked.

'From the grain, the angle, the colour saturation or lack of it... I'd say it's a still from a security camera. The technology was state-of-the-art probably about fifty years ago. Maybe only forty. Depends how well the digital stock has been stored. It's difficult to gauge the original resolution from tiiis alone.'

'Anything else?' Sam asked. She was not really sure what else there could be, but it did no harm to ask.

Gath shrugged. 'Get me the video footage this was taken from and maybe I can tell you more. Not from this, though. There's probably a camera ident watermarked into the pixels. With a decoder we could check that. If you drink it's important I can rig something up.'

'You have digitisation equipment here?' the Doctor asked.

'Oh yes,' Blanc told him. 'Martinique's own scanning and rendering equipment forms a part of the exhibition.'

'It's unpacked, over the other side of the hall,' Gath said. 'We haven't quite decided where to put it yet. For the most impact.'

Sam frowned. 'I thought he was a painter.'

'He was,' Gath replied. 'But not merely a painter. He composed his pictures as life-sets. Then he scanned in the images he wanted, painted over them with the rendering software. Most of the pieces were painted in the old-fashioned way. Only the main tableau were scanned and rendered.'

'But that was his unique technique,' Blanc explained. 'Nobody else has ever managed to duplicate the detail and vivid colour he achieved. The three-D scanners were tools, like the brush. All this nonsense about capturing the soul, about black magic and a pact with the devil, well that was just envy from his imitators and detractors.'

'I imagine his choice of subject matter did little to alleviate their fears or dispel their claims,' the Doctor said.

Gadi nodded. 'But that was the point as well. He scanned and rendered from life. But then he made it more than lifelike. The fantasy elements took it beyond a mere rendition. Gave it a new level of meaning, of imagery.'

'Is that what you call it?' Sam said quietly.

'So there's nothing much more you can tell us about this, then?' The Doctor lifted the picture from Gath's desk.

'I'm afraid not,' she said.

'And we are very busy.' The impatience was audible in Blanc's voice.

'Of course,' the Doctor said. 'So much still to arrange. I quite understand.'

'There is the Presidential reception to be sorted out,' Gadi said apologetically.

'Ah yes,' Sam chipped in. 'I'm looking forward to that.'

'I wasn't aware that we had invited you,' Blanc told her.

'An oversight, I'm sure,' the Doctor said quickly. 'We shall of course be more than happy to attend. Can you take that as our RSVP, or do we need to be more formal?'

'I'm sure that will suffice, Doctor,' Gath said before Blanc could reply.

'Good. Then we'll get out of your hair.' The Doctor led Sam back towards the opening in the partitions. 'Come along, Sam. Can't hang around here when there's fun to be had elsewhere.' He paused on the threshold, as if struck by a thought. 'Oh, by the way, do you mind if we take a quick look at Murdering art again? Just to see it back in its proper place. In context, as it were.'

Sam had started to speak as the Doctor first looked at the picture, but he had waved her to silence. Now Sam waited patiently while the Doctor examined the work. He screwed a jeweller's glass into his eye and stared at the paintwork from point-blank range.

The Doctor turned at last, the eyeglass falling into his waiting hand as he raised his eyebrows at Sam. 'It's just a painting,' he said. 'You can see the fine detail of the brush strokes. I would like to know how this rendering process of Martinique's works - it's obviously very effective.'

He turned back to the picture. 'I suppose the hair is the same colour,' he admitted as his finger gently traced the outline edge of the woman in the window. 'But since she's facing away from us, and her face is obscured, I can't honestly see why you thought there might be any more than a passing resemblance to Vermilion Kenyan.'

'Doctor,' Sam said through gritted teeth.

'Mmm?'

'May I say something?'

'Mmm.'

'We weren't imagining it. Ask Fitz when we get back to the hotel.'

He was looking at her, apparently attentive, but his eyes betrayed a lack of interest.

'She wasn't facing away when we saw her before,' Sam went on. 'Her face was clearly visible.' She almost shuddered at the memory of the figure's open mouth, hands clamped to her cheeks. 'She was terrified. Screaming. like that painting by Munch, or whatever his name is.'

The Doctor was examining the picture again. His voice betrayed his incredulity. 'Are you telling me this figure has moved?'

'Yes.'

He shook his head. 'Impossible.' He tapped his chin with his index finger. 'Unless this is actually a different painting.'

'They were switched when it was stolen? A forgery?' Sam supposed this was plausible. More plausible than the idea that a figure in a painting could move, at any rate. 'Wouldn't Gath and Blanc have noticed? Couldn't they tell?'

'Well, one would hope so .'The Doctor turned as he spoke, and his focus was over Sam's shoulder. 'Ah,' he said loudly. 'Perhaps you can help us out.'

Sam turned to see who it was. Blanc was standing behind them, almost hidden in the shadows beside the main pathway through the exhibits. He stepped forward, so that he was fully in view. She wondered how long he had been standing there.

'Are you sure this is the original work?' the Doctor asked. 'No chance it was swapped - that this is a forgery?'

'None.' Blanc gave a half-smile, one side of his mouth lifting. 'I had Gath check the rendering pattern on Martinique's equipment. It verified that this is the original.'

'Martinique's equipment, eh?'The Doctor strode up to Blanc and wrapped his arm round the man's surprised shoulder, hugging him close and stage-whispering, 'Now, I wouldn't mind a quick peek at that.' He released Blanc and asked, 'Any chance?'

Blanc regarded him for a moment, his expression neutral. Then he said slowly, 'I don't see why not.' He nodded as if taken by the idea. 'Yes, I don't see why not. In fact, I'll tell you what we can do...' His voice trailed off. 'Come with me,' he said.

'Where are we going?' Sam asked.

'To paint the Doctor's picture.' Blanc did not turn as he spoke, but led them back towards the exhibition entrance. 'Yours too, if you wish.'

Sam glanced back at the bizarre painting behind them, remembered the screaming face of the tiny woman in the background. 'No,' she said. 'No thanks.'

On the other side of the main door, opposite the office area, there was a similar partitioned-off area of roughly the same size. Blanc left the Doctor and Sam alone there for a short while as he went to find Gath.

Sam looked round. In the middle of the area was an open space. Boxes, crates and various bits of machinery were arranged round the edge, and the impression she got was of a stage, a performance area. The effect was enhanced by the fact that two large contraptions were set up either side of the area. They were built around a scaffolding frame, and each was topped with an extended prong surrounded by coils and cables which pointed back into the open area.

The Doctor was already examining one of the devices, peering closely at the prong, sighting along it, umm-ing and ah-ing. He nodded knowingly, lips pursed.

'So what is it?' Sam asked him.

'No idea,' he confessed. 'Some sort of scanner, perhaps. I imagine they need two to get the three-D effect.'

'But the pictures aren't three-dimensional.'

'How do you know?' the Doctor asked. 'You can only see one aspect of them revealed through the surrounding frame. That's like saying the TARDIS isn't four-dimensional because you're only looking at three of

the dimensions, at a three-dimensional projection of a four-dimensional object into a three-dimensional world. Now,' he went on, 'if you wanted to be able to manipulate the elements of the picture after you placed them on the canvas... Turn a female figure round to face the other way, for example...' He let the idea hang in the air. And, before Sam could pick up on it, Blanc had returned with Gath.

'A nice tableau of the two of you?' Gath suggested. 'Life-size of course.'

Sam smiled. 'I have to go, I'm afraid. I need to get back to our other friend.'

'Really?' Blanc was clearly disappointed. 'It won't take long, I promise you.'

'Really. Sorry.' Sam slapped the Doctor on the shoulder. 'Enjoy it,' she said. 'I know how much you love posing.' More quietly she added, 'And be careful.'

'As ever,' he murmured back. Then louder, 'I'll see you soon. Don't worry.'

It seemed that Gath was the expert. She fussed round the two prongs, adjusting controls. There was a main control panel against a wall, and she spent some time at it making further adjustments. 'Let me just align the projectors,' she explained.

'How does it work?' the Doctor asked.

'Basically it scans the image, then projects it into the canvas where it is rendered as a painted image,' Gath told him.

'And where's the art in that?'

'There is considerable skill in getting the image correctly rendered,' Blanc said. 'The art is a combination of things. Composing the images in the first place - the overall concept, if you will. Then there is the image manipulation, rotating and positioning the elements to achieve the desired effect. Backgrounds need to be added, and there are always elements that are not scanned, of course. Refinements, amendments, changes.'

Gath was clamping a large rectangle of canvas-like material into a metal

easel close to the console. The easel itself had various wires and tubes running from its frame back to the console. They mirrored the attachments from the console to the projectors.

'So the art is in not mirroring life? In not capturing the essence of the subject but rather in manipulating it.'

Gath gave a last tweak to a dial and stepped away from the console. 'We don't believe that the technique captures the soul, Doctor, any more than Martinique did.'

'You knew him well then?' the Doctor asked. 'Where would you like me to stand, by the way?'

'I was Martinique's personal assistant for ten years.' Gath led the Doctor into the centre of the open area, looking back at the projectors and adjusting his position slightly. 'Henri was his sponsor. We knew him as well as anyone did.' She gave a final check, and nodded with satisfaction. 'This notion that he dabbled in black magic, that he had done a pact with the devil, was pure nonsense,' she said as she returned to the console.

'So you said. But some people believed it,' the Doctor guessed.

'He did nothing to dispel the rumours,' Blanc said. 'People are so superstitious. He played on that, used it for publicity. Maybe he even believed it himself sometimes.'

'There is a - what shall we say? - diabolical theme to his work,' the Doctor said. 'I suppose that fuelled the speculation.'

'I guess so. That and the precision, the fine accuracy and detail of his work.'

Gath was waiting for them to finish. 'Ready?' she asked the Doctor.

'As ever.'

'Good. The process will take about half a minute. You can move a little if you like - the scanners will compensate. But if you keep still that will make the process slightly quicker.' She licked her lips. Anticipation or apprehension?

'Can I watch?'

Blanc pointed to the canvas clamped into the easel. 'By all means. It is interesting to see the image build up.'

'To watch my soul being captured.'

Gath and Blanc exchanged glances. 'If you like,' Blanc said quietly.

It was interesting. The Doctor watched as the canvas darkened. Then in the middle of the sheet of rough material, a shape began to form. At first there was a vague outline only. Then it started to fill with detail. This was more than just a surface scan, the Doctor realised. Closer to the datalisation that a matter transmitter might indulge in.

He could see the veins, arteries, internal organs, even vocal cords forming inside his outline. He caught Blanc's frown as his hearts took shape, seeming to beat for a moment before the ribcage closed over them. The Doctor's face started to mould into shape over his skull, obscuring his brain. He watched, fascinated, aware of Blanc and Gath exchanging glances, but not paying them any heed. They could think what they liked about what they thought they saw in his physiognomy.

Then he became aware that the two of them were now watching him and not the picture. He could make out the brush detail now. Presumably the technique, the style in which the final outer image was to be rendered, was encoded in the software that drove the process. It could no doubt be changed at will, and he supposed that part of the 'art', of the skill, was in determining which technique and style to use under what circumstances.

'Not long now. 'There was a note almost of triumph in Gath's voice. 'Almost there.'

Silence. Stillness. The painted Doctor stared back at the real one. It looked complete. Life-size and lifelike. A stunning likeness in fact. Accurate in every detail and respect.

'Is that it?' the Doctor asked at last, aware that Gath and Blanc were still staring at him, as if expecting something else to happen.

Gath was shaking her head now, the spell broken with the silence. She was checking readings, adjusting controls, exchanging worried glances with Blanc.

'It looks pretty good to me,' the Doctor said.

Gath was mouthing something to Blanc, holding her hands open as if in apology and puzzlement.

'Problem?'

'I'm sorry, Doctor.' Blanc's voice was slightly strained. He gulped. 'Yes, it is finished.'

'Oh good. We can all relax then.' He strolled over to join Gath at the console, hands in pockets. 'You seem a bit disappointed.'

She shrugged. 'It's nothing. Just - well, the feet that, while we can use Martinique's process, we always fall so short of his own skill.'

'Maybe the software needs a tweak or two,' the Doctor suggested. 'I could take a look if you like. I'm quite good at dabbling with that sort of thing.'

'No,' Gath said in sudden alarm. 'No, thank you.'

'We keep everything exactly as the great man left it,' Blanc said quickly. He took the Doctor by the arm and led him over to the finished picture - Doctor against a black background. 'Do you mind if we include this in the exhibition? As an example of the crude, raw output from Martinique's equipment.'

'Oh, not at all.' The Doctor allowed himself to be led back to the main entrance. Behind them Gath was shaking her head and fussing over the controls. The Doctor shook hands with Blanc at the door.

'It's been such fun,' the Doctor said. 'I'm looking forward to this reception thing.'

Blanc smiled, the most emotion he had shown since the process began. 'So am I, Doctor,' he said as he ushered him out. 'So am I.'

The Doctor was in a thoughtful mood as he made his way back to the hotel. By the time he reached Fitz's room, he had formulated his

thoughts to the extent that he was now certain that he was not sure what the problem was.

Fitz and Sam were sitting at the low coffee table playing cards.

'Snap,' Sam said with glee as the Doctor entered, and scooped up a pile of most of the cards.

'I hear you're now a famous male model,' Fitz said as the Doctor sat on the couch beside him.

'Star of the Martinique exhibition,' the Doctor replied. 'An example of crude, raw output.'

'How flattering,' Sam said. 'Mind you, I can see their point.'

'So what's the verdict?' Fitz asked. 'What's going on with the paintings?'

'I don't know,' the Doctor was forced to admit. He picked up a card from the table and flexed it between his fingers and thumb. 'But something certainly is going on.' He tossed the card down on to the table. It was a joker. 'I don't think they know too much about the equipment they've got down there.'

'Paints good pictures, does it?'

'Excellent. But I think it also takes DNA and possibly RNA scans. The whole thing's more like a matter transmitter than a simple three-D scanner.'

Sam frowned. 'You mean they sort of project a copy of you into the picture? Rather than just take a photo.'

'They talked about capturing my soul,' the Doctor said absently. 'I don't think it's as extreme as that. But it's fishy. Decidedly fishy.'

'Something to keep tabs on, then.'

'Yes, Sam. Something to keep tabs on.' The Doctor stared into space for a moment longer. Then he clapped his hands together suddenly. The sound was a gunshot that made both Sam and Fitz flinch. 'Right, then,' the Doctor said. 'Snap it is. Aces high, no limits.' He grinned, his eyes narrowing as he said in a low voice, 'Deal me in.'

The device that Gath held was a miniature version of one of the projectors. Rather than a large prong mounted on scaffolding, this was a hand-held box with buttons along one side and a small projector as long as Gath's little finger pointing out from the top.

They were standing in front of Defying the Angel . Blanc was behind Gath, watching over her shoulder as she operated the device. In front of them the image in the picture shimmered, as if the canvas were water rippling in a gentle breeze. Yaladriell continued to cower beneath the Devourer's paws, shimmering but unchanged. The Devourer, however, was more affected. As Gath and Blanc watched, its great goat head swung round as it looked at them. Its blood-red eyes were deep with anger and pain as it threw back its head and roared.

The Devourer lifted itself on its haunches, rearing up, abandoning the angel beneath as it lunged forward, towards the two people watching the painting. Then it slowed, as if it was pushing against an invisible membrane that covered the picture. The Devourer's movements were ponderous as it battled against the obstruction, tearing its way through into reality. There was a noise like the ripping of cloth as the Devourer clawed through the divide between worlds. A massive cloven hoof pushed out of the base of the picture as the creature stepped forward and stood in front of Gath and Blanc.

It threw back its head and roared again - a mixture of pain and elation. It took a faltering step towards Gath, reaching out towards her.

'Back,' Blanc shouted at the slaving beast. 'Back, or you know what will happen.'

The creature stopped dead in its tracks. Froth speckled its jaw as it lifted its head high, the horns disappearing above the extent of the spotlight that illuminated the picture behind it, a picture where there was now an empty space, a continuation of background, where the Devourer of Souls had stood.

'You are getting a little too enthusiastic, I think,' Blanc said. 'You know what will happen if you try to defy us, to defy me.'

The Devourer lowered its head slightly, but its eyes were still burning

with hatred and anger.

'Now,' Blanc went on, 'we have another little task for you. Nothing too arduous, except for staying unnoticed. Keeping to the shadows. But you like shadows, don't you? Darkness and shade.'

Blanc and Gath stepped aside as Blanc finished speaking. Behind them stood a large canvas, a dim shape in the darkness. Blanc pulled a small remote from his pocket and pressed a switch. In response, a spotlight streamed on, illuminating the canvas in a pool of harsh white light. The Devourer blinked, shading its eyes with a hairy paw as it stared at the full-length portrait in front of it.

'He is called the Doctor,' Gath said. 'You know what to do.'

The Devourer's voice was a deep, angry snarl of sound that seemed to be ripped from its throat. The words echoed round the exhibition hall. 'Kill him,' the Devourer rasped.

Chapter Ten

Visits and Visitors

Although there had been no official statement or announcement, there were rumours. The casino and lounges, the exhibitions and shops were almost as busy as usual. But less central areas - corridors, stairways, walkways - were all but deserted. The guests and employees of Vega congregated in brightly lit, well-populated places, or confined themselves to their rooms. Nobody was keen to venture out alone if there was a multiple killer on the loose.

The result was that the Devourer's journey to the hotel required less caution, took less time, than previous excursions. And, if anyone did catch a glimpse of its pelt or claws as it shambled from shadow to shadow, then they went quickly on their way, assuming it was a Canvine. Which was at least part of the idea.

Crossing the hotel lobby could have been problematic. But the Devourer's earliest previous outings had been largely for reconnaissance, to find the safest paths and routes, to locate Vega's most vulnerable points for sabotage. So it knew how to take a back way through the service corridors and emergency stairs to find the particular hotel room it had been directed towards.

During their discussion while playing snap, the Doctor, Sam and Fitz had decided that Fitz should continue to stay out of sight. And probably he would be better off in a room other than his own. There seemed a good chance that the hit man was still after him, so any indirection and subterfuge, however minor, was a benefit. Fitz was not convinced that hiding out in the Doctor's room would put the assassin off his trail for long, but every little helped.

He would have been grateful for some company - and potential protection. But the Doctor had muttered something about checking things with hotel reception, and Sam had decided to go back to the Martinique exhibition. They all felt that Blanc and Gath were somehow at the centre of things, but they needed more clues. With the exhibition due to open soon for preview and review audiences ahead of the Presidential reception, now seemed like a good time for Sam to try to find some.

So Fitz was alone in the Doctor's room when the Devourer of Souls came calling.

He was lying on his back on the bed, one arm crooked under his head, the other lying across his chest. Fitz was humming and staring at the white swirls of plaster on the ceiling. In his mind's eye he could see himself in the casino - unruffled, debonair, nonchalant. Replaying, correcting the events of his first night on Vega. 'My name is Kreiner,' he was saying to Vermilion Kenyan who was standing besotted beside him. 'Fitz Kreiner.' He blew out a stream of blue-grey smoke. 'I am from beyond the stars. On my planet, it is customary to shag by way of civilised greeting.'

The croupier was leaning forward, raking in the previous bets. The sound was strange - a scraping, scratching noise that you wouldn't expect to get from wood on felt. It got louder.

And louder.

And Fitz sat up suddenly. The noise was real. A banging and hammering now as well as the scrabbling sound. It was coming from the door. Almost as if something were -

A section of the wooden panelling in the middle of the door exploded inwards in a shower of splinters. A gigantic dark arm was quickly withdrawn, almost before Fitz had time to remark it. The next blow knocked out what was left of the panel. Claws ripped at the wood, tearing it away. There was a snarl of triumph and the hammering was renewed.

Fitz was frozen, leaning up on his elbow, watching as the huge creature hurled itself against the splintering remains of the door. I didn't order room service, his mind quipped, but his voice was not up to it and settled for a throaty gasp.

The hinges and the lock both gave way together under the onslaught and what little was left of the door cartwheeled into the room.

The movement was enough to break Fitz's trance, and he leapt to his feet. The creature in the doorway was a mass of hair, teeth, horns. Its head was like that of a giant deformed goat with a huge chip on its shoulder and bad breath. It swung to and fro as the creature looked

round. It saw Fitz, snarled, and continued looking.

Fitz did not have time to wonder who or what it was looking for. He was sufficiently pleased to realise that it wasn't him for his brain to stop right there and start looking for an escape route rather than waste more time trying to rationalise the creature's plan.

There were two other doors out of the room, one to the bathroom and the other to a small study area. The TARDIS was standing in a corner of the room, like a large incongruous wardrobe. It would afford Fitz a safe haven, an escape, if only he had a key. But he hadn't. Instead, Fitz forced himself to look away from the creature, to make a point of glancing at the door to the study. He hoped the creature saw him do it.

Sure enough, the creature stopped its slow advance on Fitz and swung round to follow his gaze. It cried out in delight. Or something. A long guttural snarl that dribbled away into bubbles of green saliva. Then it hurled itself at the door to the study.

Not bothering to point out that the study door wasn't locked, Fitz adopted a similar technique and hurled himself at the hole where the door to the corridor had previously been. He was a little too enthusiastic and crashed into the far wall of the corridor with a cry of pain. Grabbing his bruised shoulder and cursing under his breath, he set off down the corridor as fast as his jelly legs would wobble him.

From not far enough behind him he heard the sound of the study door exploding under the creature's assault, followed immediately by a scream of animal rage. Ahead of him was the lift. Its doors were shut. Their polished metal surfaces acted like a mirror. Normally the false-perspective view they showed suggested the corridor continued on into eternity, that you were approaching yourself along it. Now they showed a frightened young man running for all he was worth. Behind him a huge shaggy beast was barrelling down the corridor roaring with anger. It was gaining on him fast. Otherwise the corridor was empty.

Almost empty.

A tray lay on the floor outside one of the room doors, between Fitz and the lift. On the tray were the remains of a meal - plate with metal cover, wine glass, crumpled napkin, cutlery.

Cutlery. Knife, fork, spoon.

Knife. Steak knife - sharp, serrated.

Fitz slowed slightly as he reached the tray, leaned down, scooped up the knife. He almost dropped it, juggled, caught it, winced as he grasped the blade. For a second he thought he had cut himself - his hand was sticky round the blade. Then he realised it was gravy. And somehow having his hand thick with congealed gravy was more revoltingly unpleasant than if he had cut it.

He stabbed at the lift call button with his finger, still travelling forwards, colliding with the solid doors, turning as he fell, bringing up the knife.

The Devourer bounded towards him, not slowing at all, but crouched low over the ground as its powerful legs braced for it to spring forward. Fitz brandished the knife.

The Devourer slowed, eyes narrowing as it saw the blade. Fitz angled the knife, hoping to catch the light on the tempered steel like in the movies. But he just showed off the old gravy.

There was a quiet chime from behind Fitz. The lift was arriving. Distracted for a brief moment he glanced round. And the creature leapt at him.

Fitz had been leaning on the lift doors, pressed up against them. They started to open. As the creature flew at him, Fitz fell backward, trying to duck at the same time. His eyes were closed tight shut, and he had the knife stuck out in front of him, as much as anything to prevent him from falling on it.

It was only when he heard the roar of pain that he dared to open his eyes. He was lying on his back, sprawled half in and half out of the lift. The creature had sailed over the top of him, and was curled in a heap in the corner of the lift. Fitz had felt the pull on the hand that held the knife, knew he had wounded it. But any elation or relief was dispelled as the creature began to uncurl, its horns rising almost to the ceiling of the lift as it rose to its feet, towering above him.

Fitz gaped, trying to drag himself out of the lift and stand up and run all at the same time. He had wounded the thing all right. There was a cut down one of its arms. But it wasn't bleeding - it didn't even seem to

notice. The skin on the arm was flapping free as it turned towards Fitz. He could see the tear in it where the knife had ripped through. But it did not look like blood and bone and sinew and flesh.

It looked like material. Heavy cloth. Canvas.

The huge hairy thing was rushing towards Fitz again now, pushing away from the back of the lift.

Fitz had been pulling himself up on the frame of the door. He realised only as he stepped back that his thumb had been jammed into one of the lift buttons. As he withdrew his hand and stepped back, knowing that his final moments had come and waiting for the promised flash of his past life replaying itself, the lift doors started to close. His cry of fear and dread became a laugh of relief and disbelief as the creature collided with the closing doors. He saw a confused mass of fur and hair through the narrowing gap between the doors, heard the snarl of anger closed off.

He wasn't quite sure what to do now. He tossed the knife back towards the tray, let it bounce along the carpet. Certainly he wasn't going back to the Doctor's room to wait for the hairy beastie to return for a rematch. And he wasn't going to wait for the lift to return, either. Fitz turned instead towards the service door in the wall nearby. Best to take the stairs -that way he should avoid trouble.

He was just opening the door, pushing it away from him, when a huge hairy arm wrapped itself around Fitz's neck and dragged him back into the corridor. The door slammed shut as Fitz let go of it. And the world went black as his brain let go of that too.

The Presidential Suite had never actually been used by a president before. Normally it was reserved for impressionable and rich honeymoon couples or businessmen with more expenses than sense.

As far as Drexler was concerned, it was rather more plush than she needed, but the space was useful. She sat in the large study that adjoined the conference room, going over her diary for the next few days with her personal assistant Griselda and Browning Phillips. They had got as far as the arrangements for the opening reception of the Martinique Experience the next day.

'Am I expected to make a speech?' Drexler asked.

'Since you are so interested in Martinique's work, perhaps a few words would be in order,' Phillips suggested.

She winced. 'About what?'

'About the passion for Martinique's work which brought you here, perhaps?'

'Or about this new picture they've found,' Griselda suggested.

'I didn't know about this,' Phillips said. There was a hint of anger in his voice.

'I'm sorry, sir.' Griselda gulped. 'I don't think there's been an official announcement, but there are so many rumours.'

'Rumours?' Drexler asked. 'About a newly discovered Martinique?'

'Apparently it turned up here on Vega.' Griselda looked from Drexler to Phillips. The President seemed mildly interested. Phillips was staring at her, his face set in a deep frown. 'It's supposed to be a self-portrait.'

The young woman at hotel reception was most helpful. The Doctor had started vaguely with a story about a long-lost friend he had seen across the casino and wished to make contact with. Of course, he reassured the woman, he understood that she could not tell him his friend's room number, but perhaps she could give him a message...

The woman was quite happy to oblige. Now, what was the Doctor's friend's name?

It was at this point that things got even vaguer. Yet she seemed quite to understand the problem the Doctor had in not immediately being able to recall his friend's name. She raised an eyebrow when she discovered his friend was a tall well-built and athletic middle-aged man. The Doctor fumbled through an amalgam of Sam's and Fitz's descriptions of the killer. The receptionist called up data records on various guests and checked the pictures to see if any matched. Eventually, they agreed on who it must be.

'You're lucky there are so few people here at the moment,' the woman told him. 'When the President's visit was announced they suspended all incoming tours for a few days. Some sort of security measure. So we're rather underbooked right now.'

She swung the screen round so the Doctor could see the data record. 'Is this your friend?' she asked.

The Doctor was not sure. But it certainly looked like it might be. Kamil Solarin, he noted. And, by a stroke of good fortune, the man's room number was shown at the bottom of the screen. 'Yes, that's old Kamil all right,' the Doctor said, beaming. 'Thank you so much for your help. I'll call him from my room.'

'No problem, sir,' the receptionist said. 'Have a nice stay.'

Fitz woke from unpleasant dreams into a nightmare. He was slumped in an arm chair in the corner of a room. It looked much like the rooms in the hotel, only bigger. An apartment perhaps. He groaned and blinked until his eyes were used to the light and the pounding in his head had subsided a little.

It was about then that he made out the enormous hairy figure standing a few feet in front of him. Fitz cried out in alarm, and leapt to his feet. A huge paw pushed him roughly down into the chair again.

'Stay where you are,' Bigdog growled at him. 'I've got some questions I'd like answered.'

Fitz was not immediately sure whether to be relieved it was only Bigdog, or to continue in the state of terror he was rapidly becoming accustomed to. 'Er...' he stammered. 'Er...' He gulped. 'Good, I like quizzes,' he said finally, his voice somehow sounding even less brave than he felt.

'Excellent. But there are no prizes for correct answers.' Bigdog seemed to be picking something unpleasant out of his teeth with an extensive claw. 'Only for wrong ones.'

Fitz nodded, aware that his own mouth was hanging open and probably his tongue was hanging out like Bigdog's too. 'Fire away,' he said

huskily. And wished he hadn't.

Bigdog obviously thought this was meant to be a joke. Fitz could tell by the way he wasn't laughing. He regarded Fitz through large bloodshot eyes. 'I don't want to know who you are,' he said. 'Or even why you are here on Vega.'

'Oh,' Fitz said. He gulped. 'Good.'

'I don't care about you.' Bigdog's head swung uncomfortably close to Fitz's. Saliva dripped on to Fitz's knee and he resisted the urge to wipe it away. 'I only care about what's happened to Vermilion Kenyan.'

Fitz nodded. 'Right,' he said. 'Yeah. Er, Vermilion.'

'I know that you and your friends are helping Cage with her incompetent inquiry. I know that she wants to talk to Vermilion.' Bigdog drew back slightly, and Fitz was grateful for the opportunity to breathe something approaching clean air again. 'I have watched you at the casino, listened to your facetious stories, seen your immature antics. I think you know more than you let on. Am I right?'

Fitz was already shaking his head violently. 'No, no. I'm as shallow and inconsequential as I seem.' He had trouble with 'inconsequential'. It sounded more like 'incoherent' from inside Fitz's head, but Bigdog did not comment on this.

'So,' Bigdog said, grabbing Fitz's short hair and pulling his head back so hard that Fitz thought it must have doubled his hair's length, 'where is she?'

Fitz was trying to answer, really he was. But he was in pain, and he could hardly breathe for the stench, and he was staring into Bigdog's slavering jaws, and he was scared out of his wits.

Bigdog pushed Fitz's head down and let go of his hair. Fitz felt his chin bounce off his collar bone and winced. His voice was a painful mumble.

'What?' Bigdog barked. 'Speak up, man.' It sounded like 'man' was not a compliment in his language.

'I said, I think I do know where Vermilion is.' Fitz could taste salt inside his mouth. He wiped at his lips with the back of his hand and was

disappointed to find there was no trace of blood.

'Well? And none of your facetious prattle.' Bigdog had his paw raised ready to slap Fitz across the side of the head if he didn't care for the answer.

Fitz gulped. 'I think she's trapped inside a painting,' he said.

And braced himself for the blow.

The Presidential party had taken over the whole of the top floor of the hotel. Despite the fact that she seemed to have only a few bodyguards and security officers with her, they were more than sufficient to cover all the access routes. In the Presidential Suite, Solarin decided, Drexler was pretty much invulnerable. So any attempt on her life would have to take place when she was away from the suite.

He watched the security guards changing shifts, Cage's team working with the one that Browning Phillips had brought. From the corner of a small coffee lounge on the floor below, Solarin had a good view up through the central well of Vega and could see the guards making their rounds, exchanging words, getting bored.

For the moment, he decided there was little to be done. When the President left the safety of her suite, then would be the time for him to move. Solarin knew her engagements as well as she did herself. Probably better. The opening reception of the art exhibition was the first obvious point at which she was vulnerable.

So for now Solarin could relax a little. More coffee? Or back to his room for a rest and to check over the plans for the next day? He flipped a five-plaudit coin, listened to the metallic ting as his thumbnail made contact with its edge, watched it spin in the air...

When nobody answered his second loud knock, the Doctor started to examine the door. The lock, like the one on his own room, relied on simple electronics. No biometrics, no old-fashioned key. Just a card reader. Nothing his sonic screwdriver couldn't take care of in a few seconds.

Sure enough, a few seconds later, the Doctor was looking round Kamil Solarin's room. It was scrupulously tidy. Even down to the standard hotel guide sitting on the bedside cabinet, everything was exactly where it had been in the Doctor's own room when he checked in. Solarin's few possessions - clothes, mainly - were tidily packed away. A small holdall was in the bottom of the wardrobe. Above it hung a formal dinner suit with 'Style-Wear' woven into the labels of jacket, waistcoat, shirt and trousers.

It took the Doctor only a couple of minutes to determine that the things of most interest were a pair of dice lying on the bedside cabinet, a random-number generator in the top drawer of the same cabinet, and a box containing a set of crystal goblets. He lifted out one of the goblets, surprised by how heavy it was. As he held it up to the light, to see the clean cut of the facets, the bowl of the goblet pulled away from the stem.

'Oops,' the Doctor said quietly. His first thought was that he had broken it. But he could tell almost at once that this was how it was designed. The parts fitted seamlessly back together. Good craftsmanship. He pulled it gently apart again, revealing the sharp point and fine blade fashioned from the stem of the goblet. "That would spike someone's drink," he murmured, and replaced it carefully in the box. He imagined the other goblets concealed equally lethal mechanisms, and recalled Fitz's description of the man's glass gun. Clever. Unpleasant and unnecessary, but clever nonetheless. Certainly there was no doubt that Solarin was the man they were after. Or, rather, who was after them.

The Doctor let himself quietly out of the room, locking the door behind him.

Solarin sipped at his coffee. Still too hot to drink, really. He put down the cup, and angled the small screen on his palmtop comms unit so he could see the recording again. The alarm was triggered as soon as the box was opened. There was no way to disable it, it just went off. If it was Solarin opening the box, he could ignore the alarm, and if it wasn't he would know. He liked to keep things simple.

The tiny camera was concealed in the lid of the box, designed to point at the face of whoever was opening it. It recorded a two-minute sequence, and kept it until the box was opened again, or Solarin explicitly saved it.

This recording he had saved.

He recognised the man, of course. The dark curls of hair surrounding the long face. The traces of lines of age and experience. The almost uncanny depth to the eyes. It was Fitz's friend - the Doctor. So they knew who he was now. Or at least, who he was at the moment.

Solarin tried his coffee again. Still very hot. Go too fast, take no care, and you could get burned.

Fitz's face stung where Bigdog had slapped him. Probably he had not hit him hard, at least, not by Bigdog's standards.

'I said, no facetious answers.' Bigdog's words sounded muffled by the thumping inside Fitz's head.

'I'm not being bloody facetious.' Fitz's voice seemed to be running away from his brain. The words tumbled out before he thought about them. 'Sam said this figure had appeared in the back of the painting that got stolen and it looked like Vermilion and when we got the painting back the figure had moved so we couldn't see her face any more to check and the Doctor doesn't believe it but he thinks there's something funny going on at the exhibition.'

Fitz stopped at last. He wasn't quite sure whether this was because he had finished what he had to say, or because he had run out of breath. He drew another breath anyway, just in case. But his mouth didn't seem to have an immediate use for it, apart from the usual staying-alive stuff.

Bigdog was looking at Fitz. 'Art,' he said as if it were a curse. 'What do you know about art?'

'I know what I like,' Fitz hazarded.

'Opera is the only true art form.'

Fitz gulped. 'I'd rather not talk about opera, thank you.' His mouth seemed to be under some sort of control again now. And he had not been thumped for a while, so his heart rate was slowing and he was feeling slightly calmer generally.

'Why not?'

Fitz phrased his answer carefully. 'I think we might have a slight difference of opinion about opera.'

Bigdog leaned over him, braced across the chair and staring into Fitz's eyes. 'That would be a novelty,' he said. He didn't move, regarding Fitz closely. 'A painting,' he said at last.

'It's called Murdering art . In the Martinique exhibition.' Fitz offered helpfully.

'I've heard of it.' Bigdog straightened up.

'The painting or the exhibition?' Fitz asked. Bigdog glared at him. 'Er, don't feel you have to answer that,' Fitz added quickly.

There were several people at the exhibition, meandering slowly along the path of light, pausing by various pieces to admire or examine. Sam joined them, making a show of looking at paintings she would not be sorry never to see again. One of the pictures near the entrance - the one with the nasty creature looming over an angel - was covered with a dust sheet. There was no explanation as to why.

'We're open for previews.' The voice was hushed, as if they were in a library.

Sam turned to find Gath standing beside her.

'Programme?' the woman offered.

Sam took one. "Thank you." It was a small booklet made, as far as Sam could tell, of real paper.

'Was there something in particular you were interested in seeing again?' Gath stressed the 'again'.

'Er, yes, actually.' Sam fanned her face with the programme. She waited for Gath to raise an inquiring eyebrow. "The picture of the Doctor." She smiled. 'He tells me it's actually quite good.'

'I know all about you.' Fitz tried to make his voice sound confident, inject a little bravado. Not too bad, he reckoned. Considering. 'You might fool everyone else. But not me.'

Bigdog angled his head, curious. 'Oh? What do you know?'

Fitz leaned forward in the chair. He was feeling quite pleased with himself. He had worked it out somewhere between being hit and spouting gibberish. 'You're a Canvine spy,' he said. To emphasise the point, he gave a short sharp nod. Then, as the pain stabbed through his head, wished he hadn't.

Bigdog's expression had changed. His eyes seemed to have narrowed and his jaw was twitching. Score one for the good guys, Fitz thought. Got him there. But, even as he was congratulating himself, a sound escaped from Bigdog's trembling jaws. A sound that was suspiciously like laughter.

'A spy?' There were tears welling up in the huge red eyes now. And it was definitely laughter.

'Aren't you?' Fitz asked, his voice cracking slightly.

'A spy?' Bigdog said again. He seemed to be convulsing now, doubled over in mirth. 'Of course I'm a spy.' He straightened up, mainly, it seemed, so that he could throw his head back and laugh all the more. He was shaking his head as if he couldn't believe what Fitz had said. 'Everyone knows I'm a spy,' he gasped between outbursts. 'That's the point,'

'Oh,' Fitz murmured. Maybe not such a clever deduction.

Bigdog spread his arms, hairy palms towards Fitz. 'I mean,' he snorted, 'it's not much of a disguise, is it?' Then he was off again, doubled up with laughter.

Well, here was something else he could laugh at. Fitz jumped to his feet, felt his brain apparently keep moving after his head had stopped, and raced for the door. He wrenched it open, glancing back only for long enough to see that Bigdog was watching him. The tears were rolling down the wolflike face now, and he was shaking his head. Not, Fitz

thought, in admiration at his adversary's escape. But what the hell.

He slammed the door behind him and ran. He had not got far when he heard the door opening again, and ran all the faster.

Bigdog hesitated in the doorway. Should he follow the human? Why bother? He was obviously an idiot and knew nothing useful. Possibly he was demented - probably from the blows to the head. They were so fragile, these humans.

A polite cough came from nearby. 'Excuse me.' The voice was quiet, tentative. 'Mr Caruso?'

'Who are you?' he snarled as he turned.

'A friend.' The man shrugged. He was curious-looking, even for a human. He was almost entirely covered in a long dark coat, with a wide hat angled low so that his face was in shadow. He was waving a handkerchief that seemed to be stained and damp, dabbing frequently at his forehead close under the brim of the hat. 'It's hot out here,' the man said. 'Don't you think? Can we talk somewhere cooler?'

'What about?'

'About Vermilion Kenyan. I gather you are interested in locating her.' The man smiled. At least, the hint of teeth appeared in the shadows under his hat. 'I can offer you some assistance.'

Bigdog took a step away from the door into his apartment, and gestured for the man to enter. 'Please come in,' he growled deferentially. 'Let me get you a drink. Dry sherry?'

The Doctor was standing with his hands behind his back. His dark velvet coat reached to about his knees, and was open. Beneath it Sam could see the threads in his shiny waistcoat gleaming under the spotlight. His cravat was slightly awry, held almost in place under the wing collar of his shirt by a single diamond-headed pin. His face was set in an almost-but-not-quite smile. One earlobe was just visible beneath his long wavy dark hair.

The picture was life-size, which made it all the more difficult to distinguish from reality. 'It's him,' Sam said out loud. 'It really is. That's incredible.'

'It's pretty crude compared with what Martinique could do,' Gath told her. 'But, when it's someone or something you know well, it's all the more impressive. I remember the first tableau I saw him render.'

'Which was it?' Sam asked.

Gath glanced across towards the entrance. 'It doesn't matter,' she said.

'Oh, I meant to ask.' Following the direction of Gath's look, Sam had seen the dust sheet covered painting.

But Gath interrupted her before she could go on. 'Would you like to see how it's done?' There was a slight edge to the question. A hint of a smile in her eyes. Almost challenging Sam to accept.

She pursed her lips for a moment, considering. Deciding. 'No,' she said. 'Not at all, thanks.'

Gath did smile now. And her grip was tight on Sam's arm as she drew her aside, almost dragged her towards the entrance to the exhibition. 'It will only take a moment,' she said reasonably.

Sam pulled away, almost breaking the woman's grip on her arm. But Blanc was now by her side, and he took Sam's other arm.

'Five minutes,' Blanc said quietly. 'No more than that, I promise.'

Fitz had no idea where to go or what to do. He didn't fancy turning up at the casino in his current dishevelled and nervous state, but he wanted to be somewhere where the Doctor and Sam could find him. His brain was not really in gear, and the only place he could think of where he might be moderately safe was his own room. So that was where he went.

The knock at the door almost sent him scurrying for cover in the bathroom. But not quite. 'Who is it?' he inquired nervously. In answer the door clicked and swung slowly open. Fitz leapt up with a cry, ready to

run for it at the first opportunity.

It was the Doctor.

'I went to my room, expecting to find you there,' the Doctor said. 'It's in a bit of a mess, actually. And the door seems to be missing.' He slumped down in an easy chair and regarded Fitz with suspicion. 'You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?'

Gath was just closing up the exhibition when Rappare arrived. All in all the preview had gone well. They had not really advertised it, but there had been a steady stream of interested people looking round. Apart from Sam, nobody had been any problem, or asked any awkward questions about why Defying the Angel was covered over. And Sam was gone now.

'We're just closing,' she told Rappare.

'I'm sure you and Mr Blanc can spare me a moment. I wanted to discuss... money.' He said the last word as if it were somehow distasteful. A necessary evil.

'Money and paintings, I hope.'" Blanc was standing in the entrance to the office area. 'One painting in particular.'

'Indeed.'

'Good.' Blanc said. 'Perhaps we could start with you explaining how the negotiations we have held in confidence seem now to be common knowledge.'

Rappare's face was a mask of dismay. 'Rumours,' he tutted. 'There are always rumours. How do they start?' He shook his head, his tongue clicking against his teeth.

'They start,' Blanc said, 'with someone thinking he can force the asking price for something up by leaking news of its existence and thus generating an expectation that must be fulfilled.'

Rappare shuffled his feet, but said nothing.

Gath watched as Blanc led Rappare into the office. She made no effort to follow, but stayed near the door, within sight of the exhibition entrance. She was expecting someone else.

'Your stories get wilder by the minute,' the Doctor said with a wry grin. 'You're incorrigible, you really are.'

Fitz was practically shaking with frustration. 'It's not a story,' he insisted. 'You've got to believe me.'

The Doctor's expression changed suddenly to one of serious concentration. 'Oh I do, really,' he admitted. 'My door is a pile of splinters spread across the floor. I believe you.'

Fitz collapsed in a heap on the bed. 'Thank God for that.'

'Let me tell you what I've been doing,' the Doctor said brightly. 'I think I've solved your little problem.'

'Which one? Anyway, it's the big ones that worry me.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'You're welcome,' he said. 'Don't mention it. And, since you're so interested, I've found out who the man trying to kill you is.'

'Really?' This did interest Fitz.

'His name is Solarin. Well, I doubt his name really is Solarin, but that's what he's calling himself at the moment.'

Fitz nodded. 'And?'

'And his room is interesting.'

'You've met him?'

'No. Just searched his room.' The Doctor held up his hand to stop Fitz's comment. 'Don't worry. He'll never know.'

'So what do we do now? How do we stop him from killing me?'

'Well, I had rather a good idea about that.' The Doctor was obviously pleased with himself. 'I would guess that only his employers are aware that he is here, and from your experience they don't actually know each other.'

'So?'

'So I'm going to call him up, say I'm his boss, and ask him not to kill you.'

'Oh.' Fitz considered this. 'Oh,' he said again. 'That simple?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Why not?'

Actually, Fitz could think of about a thousand reasons why not. And he was pretty sure the Doctor could too. But it had to be worth a try at least.

Gath was still standing by the door when Rappare left. She watched him across the open area outside the exhibition hall. It was the time that Vega designated as evening now and the lights were dimmed to make the point. He should be back soon. Should be back already, except that he knew not to come when there were people at the exhibition. He should have been back before they opened for the preview that afternoon.

As she watched, a shadow moved along one of the corridors that gave off from the foyer area. It made its way slowly towards the door, emerging into the light at the last possible moment.

'Where have you been?' Gath demanded as the Devourer lumbered into the exhibition hall.

It ignored her, making its way to the covered painting. To home.

Gath caught up with the creature and asked again. It turned slowly to face her. 'Not kill Doctor,' it grunted. 'Not find Doctor.'

Gath sighed. 'You couldn't even manage a simple little task like that.' She reached out and grabbed the creature's arm, examining the rip in it. The picture would need repairing. She sighed heavily. More work.

'Not in his room,' the Devourer grunted. 'Other man there.'

'That's all right.' Blanc's voice was clear and loud. 'I doubt the Doctor can cause us much of a problem now. And, even if he tries, we have some collateral. Something to bargain with.'

Gath smiled. 'Indeed we do.'

'And we have other things to be getting on with. More important arrangements to make.'

The Devourer ignored them both. It grabbed the dust sheet and pulled it from the painting, letting it fall in a tangle on the floor. Then, with the ripping, tearing sound of the dimensions parting to allow it in, the Devourer stepped back into the picture.

'You don't know me, and I would not normally communicate with you in this way.'

The comms unit was set to one-way video. Solarin could see the Doctor, but the Doctor could not see Solarin. The assassin sat back and folded his hands on his stomach. He dealt in the unexpected, but this was a turn-up. 'Go on,' he said.

'We have been in contact before, of course,' the Doctor said. 'When I hired you for this mission.'

'Oh?'

'But circumstances have changed, and I'm afraid I must cancel our arrangement.'

'Oh.'

'You will of course be paid in full.'

'Of course.' Solarin considered, rolled the dice. 'What circumstances?' he asked.

'You don't need to know that,' the Doctor snapped. 'All you need to be aware of is that the man Fitz need not now be killed. Or the other target.'

'You hired me to kill someone, and now you no longer wish me to do so, is that correct?'

'Quite right.' The Doctor looked relieved that this was sorted out.

'Fine.'

The Doctor stared at what Solarin knew would be a blank screen. 'Oh, good,' he said, obviously pleased. 'Well, that's that then. Thank you. And goodbye.'

'Not quite goodbye yet.' He let this sink in for a moment. "There is still the matter of my payment. I assume we'll meet as arranged in, what, an hour?'

'Of course.' He hid his surprise and worry well. 'As arranged. An hour. Er, I think in the light of events we should perhaps change the venue though.'

Solarin waited, let him panic a little. He picked up the pack of cards that lay on the table beside the chair, and shuffled them. 'You're right,' he said at last. Then he cut the cards, and looked at the result. 'One hour. I'll be waiting outside the Martinique exhibition.'

He cut the connection. Either the Doctor would be there, playing along with his ridiculous story, thinking he had deceived Solarin, or he wouldn't. Either way the man was dead. Another loose end tied up. It was just a question of where. And how soon.

Chapter Eleven

Still Life

The Doctor broke the connection. He sat in silence for a while, tapping his chin with a thoughtful finger. 'I shall have to go alone, I'm afraid,' he said at last.

Fitz tried to sound suitably disappointed. 'Oh,' he said. 'Oh dear.' When there was no reply, he added, 'Why's that?'

'Because he will know you. He's probably been watching you. If we're lucky, you and not me. And Sam isn't here.' The Doctor frowned. 'She should be back by now, but never mind.' He looked up and smiled broadly. 'Should be easy enough.'

'Yes.' Fitz nodded enthusiastically. 'I suppose you don't really need us there. Piece of cake.'

'Mmm?' The Doctor wasn't really listening. 'No thanks,' he said as he stood up. 'Best be on my way. I'd rather be early than late.' He grinned again. 'Be prepared, as I told good old Baden-Powell.'

Fitz got up too. 'I'll come with you as far as the foyer,' he said. 'I think I'll wait in the casino.'

'Good idea,' the Doctor agreed. 'Sam may have gone back there.'

'And,' Fitz said, 'it's got to be better than hanging around here waiting for the monsters.'

The distaste was evident on Gath's face as she looked around. But Forster did not care. They weren't here to admire the soft furnishings, but to examine the painting. Blanc was less obviously intimidated by the mess and the dust. Forster, like Rappare, was impassive. Like Rappare, he was more interested in their reaction to the picture.

Rappare led his two prospective customers through to the back office. He held the door for them and waved them towards chairs that had been especially unearthed from the piles of detritus that had buried them just minutes previously. Forster angled his wheelchair through the door,

ignoring Rappare's wince as he rolled it over the end of his foot.

'A drink, perhaps? Rappare asked once they were all seated.

'Thank you, but no.' Blanc seemed relaxed, leaning back in the chair, hands folded over his lap. Gath, by contrast, was perched on the edge of her seat. She shook her head, a hurried, nervous movement. On edge in more ways than one, Forster could see.

'You won't mind if we do?' Forster said. It was worth playing them along a little. He and Rappare were in charge here, making the running. And they all knew it. 'A small Madeira, if you would, Newark.'

'Of course.' Rappare pulled open the top drawer of a filing cabinet and reached inside. 'I think I shall join you if I may.' He pulled out a bottle, and blew the dust off in a cloud. Next he retrieved two small, grimy glasses. 'Ninth century Travanian crystal,' he explained as he poured a little liquid into each. 'Second dynasty,' he added almost as an afterthought.

'Almost priceless,' Forster said as he took the glass Rappare offered. He had actually bought them in a discount glassware store on Stanatapol for three plaudits. A set of six originally, but they'd broken or chipped the other four. They were giving them away free with rocket fuel now, he gathered.

'The painting,' Blanc reminded them. 'If we could see it, please?'

'Oh, of course.' Rappare took a quick sip of Madeira. He paused long enough to smack his lips together appreciatively, as he set down the glass on a rare exposed surface on the desk. Then he reached down behind the desk and pulled out a large, flat, rectangular package tied with string. He gently laid it on top of the debris on the desk and carefully undid the knots.

'We have had it for a while,' Forster explained as Rappare unwrapped the picture. 'Originally, of course, it was a curiosity more than anything. Then, after Martinique's death, his work became more... collectable, shall we say?'

It was obvious that neither Blanc nor Gath was listening to him. Their attention was fixed on the tiny shower of dust thrown up as Rappare undid the last knot and pulled open the cardboard wrapping. There was

a faint hiss as the vacuum seal was broken. Then Rappare drew out the painting and held it for them to see.

Gath actually stood up. Blanc was now perched on the edge of his chair, mirroring Gath's earlier pose. They leaned closer to the painting as Rappare angled it so it was well in the light. Forster smiled thinly. They were hooked. As soon as they saw it, they had formed opinions, made subconscious decisions.

'Extraordinary,' Blanc breathed. 'Quite extraordinary.'

Gath stood in silence, mouth slightly open. She reached out towards the picture, her fingers stopping just shy of its surface, as if afraid they might be burned. Then she drew her hand back, almost cautiously.

The frame was a simple, dark border. The painting was also simple. A man's head and shoulders. His dark hair was a wild explosion from his scalp. His eyes were narrow, calculating. His skin was pale, his lips full. He wore a dark cravat at his throat, and beneath that the top of a stained painter's smock was visible.

'It is signed, of course,' Rappare said, pointing to the tiny spidery signature in the corner of the painting.

'It doesn't need a signature,' Gath said. Her eyes were moist, her voice trembling. 'The style is unmistakable. It's absolutely typical of his later work. An almost perfect example.'

Rappare grinned. 'I'm glad you like it. You know the sum we are asking.' He started to put the painting back into its packaging. 'We can give you a little time to make your minds up, of course.'

'And in the meantime,' Forster said, 'we shall keep the painting safe and sound.' He wheeled himself to the door, and pulled it open. 'I'm sure you can find your own way out. And you know where we are when you want to talk.'

The Doctor was in an upbeat mood as he approached the exhibition. He was humming a tune from the opera they had seen, smiling at the few people he saw. The further he got from the main hotel/casino complex, the fewer people he did see. Most, he guessed, would be staying close

to 'home' and safety. To them these were unsettling, worrying times. To the Doctor, of course, it was pretty much business as usual.

So close to the opening reception, he had expected the exhibition to be busy. He knew they had been open for previews that day, and was banking on its being open still - a place where there were people around, in case there was a problem.

But, as he stepped from the lift, the Doctor saw that the area was deserted, the doorway into the exhibition closed. He was early yet, so the Doctor strolled up to the door and tried it. Locked, of course. He considered. There were several exits from the area, but it would do no harm to have another escape route available. He slipped his sonic screwdriver from his pocket and set to work on the lock.

It took only a moment, then the door clicked loudly. The Doctor did not bother to check it was unlocked. Instead he pocketed his sonic screwdriver, thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and did a short tour of the open area. He stopped at the railing round the central well, and looked over. It was a long way down. He watched the tiny figures far below as they got themselves coffee, and made their ways to their tables. He stood, one foot resting on the lowest railing, leaning over. His hands were still in his pockets, and he was still humming.

The tap on the shoulder was completely unexpected. He had not heard the man come up behind him, and turned in startled surprise. 'You move very quietly,' the Doctor said in admiration.

The killer, Solarin, smiled. 'It helps,' he said, 'in my business.'

'I'm sure.'

'You brought the money?'

The Doctor nodded. He could feel his back pressed against the railing. The man was uncomfortably close. 'A credit note from the Vega Bank.' He had paused to write it out on the way. It would bounce of course, but that hardly mattered. 'I have left the amount open for the moment. I thought we should perhaps negotiate a revised fee given the early termination of your services.' He drew a folded slip of paper from his jacket pocket.

'Did you?' Solarin pressed even closer to the Doctor. His hand was out in

front of him, as if to take the credit note. 'It wasn't because you don't know the actual amount we agreed, then?'

'What?'

The man's hand was turned now, ignoring the paper, pressing palm first at the Doctor's chest. 'You are not my employer,' Solarin said quietly. 'You have no idea why I'm really here, or who I am working for.' He continued to push.

The Doctor was bent back over the railing now. He turned to look down, and wished he hadn't. The credit note wasn't the only thing that would bounce. 'I think that's an exaggeration,' he said, the worry evident in his voice. 'I could make a pretty good guess at the former.' His voice was becoming strained as he tried to press back against Solarin's hand. 'And I could make a wild stab at the other.' And, having tested the strength of his opponent, the Doctor lunged forward, bringing all his weight and strength to bear against the assassin's hand and arm.

There was a look of surprise, almost disbelief, on Solarin's face as his arm buckled and the Doctor sprang away from him.

'Not convinced by my performance, then?' the Doctor asked.

'Sadly not. It was a little inept.' Solarin had moved to block the Doctor's escape down the main corridor. The lift doors were shut. Solarin pulled a device made apparently of glass from his pocket. He held it up, as if to check it was intact. Then he took another glass component from his other pocket, and slotted the two together.

'A gun?' the Doctor asked, backing away still. 'Very clever.'

'Thank you.' Solarin brought the gun up. 'I aim to please.'

The Doctor was already moving, diving, rolling across the floor as the toughened-glass bullet shattered against the wall behind him. It left a starburst of pale blue etched into the masonry. The Doctor's roll brought him to the door into the exhibition. He leapt up and reached for the handle.

'Sorry, must dash.' The Doctor grinned, turning the handle.

'So soon?' Solarin was walking slowly towards him, the Doctor saw as

he glanced back. He was bringing the gun up again for another shot.

The Doctor held the door handle at its full extent, and turned to face his killer. The gun was aimed right at his face. The Doctor pressed back against the door. The gun fired.

And, as the Doctor pressed back against it, the door sprang open, and he fell backwards through it. Sprawled on his back, he reckoned he felt the bullet graze past his nose. Then he was on his feet, running for all he was worth into the darkened exhibition hall.

For a moment Solarin stood framed in the lighted doorway, the gun at his side. Then the silhouette was gone, and the door closed slowly, cutting off the light. Shutting in both the Doctor and his would-be assassin.

Getting away without Phillips knowing had been harder than she had anticipated. But, all being well, he would never find out that the President had slipped away from her suite for an hour. She had to take a bodyguard with her of course, or the duty guard would never have let her out without referring to Phillips. But safety and secrecy were, she hoped, not incompatible. She had spent much of the short journey impressing upon the man the need for his absolute trust and silence.

Robyn Drexler told the bodyguard to wait outside, and pushed open the door.

The room was almost in darkness. The door clicked shut behind her, and it occurred to Drexler for the first time that she was alone now - vulnerable. That she might never leave this room.

From somewhere to the side of her came a low growl. She turned towards the sound. 'Who's there?' Her voice trembled. 'Where are you?'

Her eyes were becoming accustomed to the dim lighting now, and she could see movement. Something there -something large, an indistinct shape rising up from a chair. The lights came up a fraction. Just enough for her to make out the massive hairy form that was now approaching her, its arm outstretched, saliva dribbling from its open jaws.

'You are very brave to come here alone.' The voice was a rasping

cough. A mixture of bark and laugh. 'President Drexler,' the Canvine said, still reaching out towards her, 'I am Bigdog Caruso.'

It was a basic exercise in tracking and elimination. Solarin made his way through the darkened exhibition hall section by section, always circling back to check that his quarry had not sneaked round behind him. He knew that the man he was hunting was as disadvantaged as he was himself by the darkness. Probably more so. He also knew that, of the two of them, Solarin was almost certainly able to move more quietly. It was just a question of time.

He turned a full circle, gun held ready, listening, staring into the near blackness. And froze.

The man - the Doctor - was standing so still, so silent, that he almost missed him. Solarin smiled, brought the gun up. The Doctor continued to watch him, unmoved and unmoving. Solarin sighted, frowning. What was wrong with the man? He must have seen him by now.

Then, abruptly, he realised his mistake. He released the pressure on the trigger and put up the gun. It was not the Doctor at all. For some reason there was a life-size painting of him standing at the side of the main exhibition. He reached out, brushed the surface of the painting with his fingers just to be sure. Then he shook his head, and started tracking his target again.

Time. That was all it took now. Time...

Not daring to light up, Fitz contented himself with counting how many cigarettes he had left. Eight.

He had got through several while waiting in his room for the Doctor. Or Sam. Or the assassin. Or the monster. About one for each, probably. And now he was down to eight. Well, it gave his mind something to focus on while he waited for the Doctor and wondered where Sam had got to.

Across the casino people laughed and joked and played. Had fun. Despite the slightly forced atmosphere, the undercurrent of worry about

sabotage and rumours of death, they seemed oblivious of the thousand niggling anxieties and questions that Fitz squeezed to the back of his brain. They seemed able to ignore the mystery and the intrigue and the death. Fitz watched Harris Stabilo as he made his rounds. His worries were probably limited to who was upset with the service, or why his takings were a bit down today.

Fitz realised that he had watched Stabilo all the way round the casino. And now he had reached Fitz's table. Was he aware that Fitz had been watching him - staring at him? Was he expecting some complaint?

'Are sir's friends not joining him today?' Stabilo asked, rubbing his hands nervously together. 'A prior engagement, perhaps?'

'Something of the sort,' Fitz confessed.

'Indeed. Indeed. Well...' Stabilo seemed to waver between saying something more or continuing on his way. 'A drink, perhaps?'

Fitz looked down, and saw that he had finished his martini. Strange that his head hadn't noticed the alcohol input yet. Adrenaline, perhaps. Or panic. 'Yes, please,' he said. 'A dry martini. Shaken -'

'Not stirred,' Stabilo interrupted. 'Yes, I know. You keep saying.'

Fitz looked up at him, surprised. It was the first time he had heard genuine irritation, anger almost, rather than obsequiousness and deference in the man's voice. He caught Stabilo looking back at him intently. Immediately Stabilo looked away, avoiding Fitz's eyes, as if embarrassed.

'I'll have it sent over to you right away, sir,' Stabilo said. He shook his cuff free and waved his hand to attract one of the waiters. 'Excuse me, sir,' he said with a slight inclination of the head and an obsequious smile. Then he was scurrying away towards the waiter.

Fitz watched him go. And suddenly he felt a snow-cold chill run down his back.

On the other side of the casino, Rappare and Forster were playing cards together. The remains of a bottle of white wine sat in a cooler beside the

table. They were both in high spirits. Occasionally one or other, or both, of them would giggle. Then Rappare laughed out loud, and before long Forster was joining in.

Eventually, Forster wiped a tear from his eye. 'So you think they're interested, then?'

And Rappare collapsed low in his chair, racked with another fit of laughter. 'It's possible,' he admitted as he gasped for breath. 'Just possible.' He made an effort to sit up. 'Are we incredible or what?' he demanded.

'Are we rich or what?' Forster retorted.

Had they been less interested in their own situation, had they looked across the casino to where Fitz was sitting, they might have seen him leap to his feet. They might have seen the emphatic shape of his mouth as he swore, seen the waiter's annoyance as he brought a martini to an empty table. They might have turned, as Stabilo did, to see Fitz striding from the casino, hurrying on his way to the Martinique Exhibition.

Nothing. Solarin had been through the entire exhibition hall now. Nothing. He was certain he would have heard any movement. The man had run to a point, then stopped. Yet he was nowhere to be found. The only explanation was that the Doctor was somehow quieter than he could hear, and had been blessed with night vision.

Solarin paused. He stood absolutely still by the back wall as he considered his options. The Doctor was still there, that much was certain - nobody had left the hall. So the only options were to search back through and pick him up on the way or to put the lights on and start again. He felt in his pocket for one of the dice, pushing his thumb against its face and feeling the tiny indentations of the dots. Four or over and he would go for the lights.

Even as Solarin decided on his course of action, there was a sound from the other end of the hall. As he watched, the main door opened.

'Doctor?' a voice called. 'Doctor, are you in there? I've realised something important...'

A figure was outlined in the doorway. The young man - Fitz. Solarin took aim. It was a long shot for the glass gun. But by no means impossible, particularly in an atmosphere with no appreciable air movement. He squeezed the trigger.

Fitz was about to give up and leave when the door swung back and hit him in the side. He yelped and flinched with the blow. And at the same moment something whistled past his ear and embedded its shattered remains in the door frame beside him. 'Whoa!' Fitz shouted, and dived to one side. The side of his face felt as if it had been scratched by flying glass.

'Over here!' whispered a voice in the darkness as the door banged shut.

'Doctor?'

'Yes. Be quiet.' The Doctor's voice was an urgent hiss.

'Why didn't you answer before?' Fitz asked, annoyed.

'Because you'd have just gone away then. And not got shot.'

'Ah.'

'Now be quiet and lie still.'

Fitz resisted the urge to ask how the Doctor knew he was lying down, in fact he was on his face with his hands knitted together over the back of his head. As if that would help. Probably he was guessing, Fitz decided. It was a pretty safe guess.

After a few moments of silence, Fitz rolled on to his back and stared into the darkness. He was too far from the door to risk getting back to it, he reckoned. But he was too close to it to be safe. He would do better to make his way further into the exhibition. He could move silently and attract no attention. Yes, that would be best. He rose quietly and slowly to his feet.

'Agh!' The cry escaped from his lips even before he realised he was in pain. His knee had collided with one of the exhibition stands. He could hear it rocking back and forth on its supports. He thought he heard an

exasperated sigh from close by as well - the Doctor?

Arms outstretched in front of him this time, Fitz crept forward, feeling with his toes as he went. A figure loomed up in front of him, and Fitz bit his tongue to stop crying out again.

It was the Doctor. Or was it? He seemed very still. Posed.

Solarin shook his head. It was just too comical for words. To think he had considered this man a professional. He watched Fitz sleepwalk his way across the hall. He made no effort to stick to the darker areas, and he had obviously not allowed his eyes to adjust to the darkness yet. Madness.

The young man was approaching the painting of the Doctor. Solarin stepped carefully towards it too. He was facing it straight on, coming up behind Fitz now. The painting seemed to watch Fitz stop in front of it, seemed to watch Solarin step in front of the man, between him and the painting, and raise his gun.

Fitz had seen him, he could tell. Solarin aimed between the young man's terrified eyes and squeezed the trigger.

The knock at the door was at once both quiet and insistent. Blanc and Gath exchanged glances.

'That must be him,' Gath said.

'Of course it's him.' Blanc went to the door to his hotel suite, and slowly opened it a crack. Then he swung it wide and gestured for the figure outside to come into the hotel room.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' the newcomer said.

Blanc smiled. 'No problem.' There was a trace of relief in his words. 'You are in charge, after all.'

'So I am, so I am. But even so...' He sat down in the sofa and waved for Gath and Blanc to be seated too. 'I've just come from the President,' he

said. 'I hope everything is prepared for her?'

There was just time for Solarin to realise his mistake as he blacked out. He heard his shot go wide as he crashed to the floor. The sound was followed by the crash of shattering glass as his gun hit the floor, hard, and exploded into a million shards. Clever. Very clever. So one of them at least was a professional after all.

Fitz breathed out heavily. His eyes had adjusted to the dark now, but, even so, seeing the painting of the Doctor apparently come to life as Solarin raised the gun had been almost as frightening as staring down the barrel. Almost.

'Is this the sort of situation where the phrase "nick of time" is appropriate?' he asked, his voice quivering.

'Could be.' There was an air of satisfaction in the Doctor's voice. 'I had to make sure he'd seen it once, knew it was just a picture,' he said. 'That way I could be pretty sure he wouldn't look too closely next time.'

'And you just stood in front of it.'

'You had a better plan?' the Doctor asked.

But, before Fitz could answer, the lights came on. Sudden, harsh light flooded the room, making the broken glass on the floor around them glitter and flash. They both covered their eyes.

'I think that whatever plans you have will need to wait.' The voice was a rich baritone, cultured, sophisticated. Authoritative.

When Fitz had blinked enough to be able to see the man with the gun standing in front of himself and the Doctor, he blinked a few times more, just to be on the safe side. It was Harris Stabilo.

Except that it wasn't, somehow. Quite apart from the change in his voice, his whole manner seemed different. He was covering them with the gun, his free hand thrust into his jacket pocket with a nonchalance that suggested he knew exactly what he was doing. His face was grim, set

into a determined stare. 'I see you've met one of my employees, except of course that you -' he gestured to Fitz by waving the gun slightly in his direction - 'have already met him, at the casino. Unfortunately.'

On the floor, Solarin was stirring, shaking his head and getting to his feet.

'But for your benefit, Doctor,' Stabilo went on, 'may I introduce Hazard, the most proficient assassin in known space.' He glanced down at the stirring figure. 'Usually' he added.

'Delighted,' the Doctor said. He didn't sound it. 'And what exactly is your interest in our affairs?'

Stabilo reached out and helped Hazard Solarin to his groggy feet. 'Oh, I run this place,' he said. 'I'm in charge of everything that happens here on Vega.'

Chapter Twelve

Façades

For a while nobody spoke. Solarin was covering the Doctor and Fitz with the handgun Stabilo had previously been holding and had now given him. Stabilo fixed them with a pensive gaze, as if unsure quite what to do or say next, and thrust his hands into his jacket pockets. His pink jacket pockets.

It was Fitz who broke the silence. 'I just realised, Doctor, in the casino. It was Stabilo, all made up, who gave me the envelope.'

'And you thought you'd better warn me?' The Doctor smiled suddenly and unexpectedly. 'How kind. Thank you.'

Fitz shrugged. 'Well, if he was in on it...'

'But you're more than just "in on it", aren't you?' the Doctor said to Stabilo. 'It's you that Miss Cage reports back to,' he continued. 'I should have guessed, I suppose. I assumed it was someone back on Battrul.'

'I'm the chief executive officer of Vega,' Stabilo said.

'So why pretend to be such a poofter?' Fitz asked.

The Doctor answered before Stabilo had a chance to speak. 'Please, Fitz, let's not be rude to our friend here. I think he cultivates the image you describe so colourfully because Vega is supposed to be independent, an embarrassment to the authorities.' He turned to Stabilo. 'Am I right?'

Stabilo nodded. 'To admit that it's actually a government-run facility might be a little embarrassing,' he agreed. 'My actual cover persona was not my idea. There was a slight sneer in his voice, a trace of dissatisfaction. That was dreamed up by Phillips. I think he meant it as a joke, expected me to complain.'

'I hope you didn't give him the satisfaction of that.' Solarin's voice was quiet, but there was an underlying menace to it.

'Of course not. And that's why I'm stuck with the persona I have.'

The Doctor took the opportunity to walk to the other side of Fitz. The gun tracked him, and Fitz could see him watching for any sign of how much danger they were really in. 'And then there's the real reason for this place, Vega's actual purpose.' The Doctor grinned as if this were a point so obvious that he was making it only to be polite. 'That needs to be kept secret, I imagine.'

Stabilo's eyes narrowed. 'Not secret enough, it seems.'

'Don't worry,' Fitz reassured him. 'My head's still looping the loop, if that's any help.' He was watching very carefully where Solarin pointed his gun. But so far the exchange seemed remarkably relaxed and informal. Which probably meant they were about to die. So, nothing to lose... 'Want to let me in on it?' he asked.

'It was the surveillance equipment that gave it away, I suppose,' Stabilo said. As he spoke he reached out and gently pushed Solarin's gun downwards. The meaning of the gesture was obvious, and Solarin held the weapon out for Stabilo to take.

'Cage's explanation that it was for internal security was evidently spurious,' the Doctor agreed.

Stabilo smiled. 'It might be rather more useful right now if it really were to observe inside the station.'

'But it isn't, is it?' the Doctor went on. 'It's to check on the buffer zone, am I right? An early-warning system?'

'Vega was set up soon after the war,' Stabilo explained. 'The cultural-centre bit, the gambling, duty-free, all that is a cover. Vega is an independent business entity all right. Oh, it makes a bit of money, which I'm sure the government is less than pleased about since it just accumulates. But its real purpose is defensive.'

'You monitor the buffer zone for any sign of a Canvine incursion.' The Doctor nodded. 'You're watching out for an invasion.'

'We did not want to be taken unawares. The peace treaty expressly forbids legitimate installations so close to Canvine space, so near the edge of our own territory. So we pretended that Vega was an embarrassment. Even opened it to the Canvines. All part of the cover for what this place is really about.'

Fitz was getting the general idea. 'And you're part of the cover too.'

Stabilo nodded. 'Though it's less and less important. With the changes of attitude and government at home, and with the Canvines having mellowed a little over the years... None of us wants another war. There's no reason for them to try to invade. It was paranoia as much as anything.'

'And they know all about it anyway.' Fitz was expecting a reaction to this. 'Bigdog is a spy,' he said.

Stabilo gave a grunt of suppressed laughter. 'Yes. Yes, we all know that. And he knows that we know. We play our own little games here on Vega. We arrange for the listening post to be unoccupied at certain times. Bigdog checks on us, takes copies of the logs. And we intercept and decrypt his reports home to Canvine. Each side knows exactly what the other is up to, though we never admit that out loud.' He shrugged. 'Except under exceptional circumstances,' he admitted. 'Honesty, even in a dishonest way, is the best form of deterrent there is.'

They had abandoned all pretence at playing cards now. The serious business of drinking and self-congratulation had taken over completely. Forster was slumped in his wheelchair, glass in hand, half supported against the chair's armrest. Rappare was leaning across the table, his sleeve soaking up some of the wine that was sloshing out of his glass as he spoke. He punctuated his words with large, almost theatrical, gestures. On the table between the two of them lay a rectangular package wrapped in brown cardboard.

When Rappare paused it was either to take a sip of wine, or to stare in surprise at the small amount left in the glass before refilling it. Whenever he refilled his own glass, he leaned across and topped up Forster's, whether it needed it or not. Whenever the bottle was empty, another arrived. The waiters in the casino knew Rappare and Forster, and they recognised the mood they were in. They ran up their tab without comment or censure.

'We've got them hooked; Rappare said yet again, waving his glass around dangerously over the package on the table. 'Completely hooked.' He waited a moment for Forster to nod enthusiastic agreement. 'And we

haven't started yet. We still have a few tricks up our sleeves.' He shook his arm as if to show Forster what a sleeve looked like, in case he didn't know. Wine slopped on to the table, and he frowned at his soggy sleeve, as if surprised at how wet it was.

'I think,' the Doctor was saying, 'that you rather like the setup here. Despite the ridiculous cover persona, and the stropky customers, I think you enjoy the life you've made for yourself.'

Stabilo thought for a moment before answering. 'It's funny,' he said at last. 'You only realise how much you appreciate something when you are in danger of losing it. I do like it here. It's home now, for me, Cage, Slavich at the bank. I'm not an actor, or a spy, any more than the others on the executive committee are. I'm a soldier. All this pretence is a bore and a strain. And we agreed not too long ago that we won't let anyone take Vega away from us now. We've effectively run this place as our own business for so long now. We've grown to like it, despite our initial concerns. We belong here. We're even good at it.'

The Doctor had been pacing slowly back and forth as Stabilo spoke. He paused now, turned to the CEO. 'Is that why you hired Hazard here to kill the President?' he asked.

Solarin and Stabilo both stared at him in surprise. Fitz could sense a sudden tension in the air.

'I thought you were Hazard,' Stabilo said to the Doctor. 'For a while. I knew it wasn't Fitz here who was the professional. An intermediary, I supposed. A messenger boy.'

'Thanks a bunch,' Fitz said. 'So that's why you were watching me and making faces.¹

'I'm glad we uncovered the truth in time.'

'In time to bump off the President?' Fitz asked. 'She's come here to shut down Vega, so you're going to kill her to keep your jobs and homes intact. That's it, isn't it?' He was quite pleased with the reasoning, and watched Stabilo closely for his reaction.

'No,' Stabilo said. 'That isn't it.'

'Oh?'

'I don't think the President will shut down Vega. Not the whole station. But yes, she is here to see for herself what we do, to gauge the situation with the Canvines at first hand. Everyone knows she favours a rapprochement rather than continuing this uneasy treaty arrangement. And there are certainly those who would rather she was dead than we had peace, real peace.'

'So why is Hazard here?' the Doctor asked quietly, nodding at Solarin.

'A precaution,' Stabilo said. 'We did not believe that Phillips's security measures were as extensive as would be sensible. But then he has little interest really in the President's safety, only in his own skin, job and wealth.'

'So I was hired; Solarin said, 'to protect the President. Not to kill her.'

'Who better,' Stabilo said, 'to ensure that she comes to no harm, at least here on Vega - on my turf - that the galaxy's most accomplished assassin?'

He was surprised that the lights were on. He could also hear voices. He pushed the door open just enough to slip inside the exhibition hall. When he wanted to, he could move almost silently.

Across the hall he could see Stabilo talking with the Doctor and Fitz. There was another man with him, broad-shouldered and tall. There was an air of danger about him, a sense of suppressed power and energy.

He chose his route carefully, making sure he was rarely in sight of the people talking. He wished to make his way unobserved through the exhibition. He could not quite make out what Stabilo was saying, but it did not matter. He wasn't here to eavesdrop. He had come to look at the pictures.

'Is it time to... you know?' Forster asked. He giggled and took a swig from his glass.

'Oh nearly. Nearly.' Rappare was nodding slowly. He kept nodding, as if he had forgotten how to stop, as he continued: 'Maybe we can push their offer up just a tad further before...' He broke off in order to stop nodding and start laughing uncontrollably.

'Before...' Forster took over. 'Before...' But he could no more finish the thought than Rappare could.

They were both leaning across the table now, in fits of laughter. Rappare put down his glass, half on the table, in order to slap his palm down on the surface. The glass jumped, and a passing waiter retrieved it and placed it back on the table at a point of relative safety.

'Before...' Rappare managed to force out. He waved his hand, a 'you-know' gesture. His hand connected with the repositioned glass and sent it flying across the table. It fell to the floor with a sound that was drowned out by the renewed laughter. Nearby, Trew the waiter closed his eyes and counted slowly to ten.

'Have you got it?' Forster was asking between giggles. 'Have you got it here?'

Rappare nodded again, his whole body shaking in sympathy as he fumbled in his jacket pocket. He paused, frowned, fumbled some more, stopped laughing. 'Er...' Then his face cleared, and he delved into the other jacket pocket with both hands. He was grinning now, hands fighting to get out of the pocket again.

But they were grasping something, and his fists were too big. The result was he was almost standing, leaning over the table apparently engaged in a wrestling match with himself. If some incredibly strong small alien creature had been trying to drag him into his own pocket by his hands it would have looked much the same. Apart from the fact that he was laughing maniacally again.

Incredibly, Rappare managed finally to get his hands out of his pocket, and brandished the small metal box he had retrieved with something akin to triumph. 'Da-da!' he exclaimed.

'Dada?' Forster said, confused.

'No, no. Here it is. Here.' Rappare thrust the box under Forster's nose. It

was about the same size as his fist, and completely sealed. A series of buttons was set into one side, together with a small readout screen.

Forster took hold of the box. But Rappare was not about to let go, and they pulled it back and forth between them.

'Let's do it,' Forster said as he dragged the box to his lap.

'Not yet,' Rappare countered as he pulled it back.

'Let's do it now.'

'No, no. Let's wait.'

'Now!'

'Wait!'

They both paused, creased up again with fits of giggles, four hands on the box, holding it between them. Forster's glass was lying in his lap, empty. A wet patch spread over his trousers where the wine had spilled. Slowly, he looked down at it, Rappare following his gaze. Then Forster swore and let go of the box.

Rappare went flying backwards, clutching the box. He clambered to his feet, laughing loudly and pointing at Forster's wet patch. Forster glared at him. Then he too crumpled up in laughter, dabbing at his lap with a napkin from the table. It was wetter than his trousers.

'When?' Forster asked as they regained some semblance of control over themselves.

'Soon,' Rappare said. 'Very soon.'

'Blanc will have to pay through the nose,' Forster said. 'He'll have to.'

'Especially with the Presidential reception.'

'We've got him.'

Rappare leaned back, and grabbed a passing sleeve. Trew swung round, caught in mid-step. 'Could we have another bottle of the whatever it is?' Rappare asked.

'No.'

Rappare blinked. Forster gaped. Suddenly they were much more sober, and far less amused. They both glared at Trew.

'Just kidding,' he said.

They both collapsed in laughter again, Rappare wagging an admonishing finger at Trew. But they were nowhere near as manic or uncontrolled as before. The spell was broken. A measure of order was restored.

The coin spun in the air. The echo of Solarin's thumbnail connecting with the metal had hardly died away when he snatched the coin back and turned it over on to the back of his other hand.

'Not a terribly scientific way of deciding if we're telling the truth,' the Doctor observed. He had spent the last few minutes explaining that Fitz and Sam and he were motivated mainly by their desire to protect the President when Fitz impersonated Solarin and the Doctor attempted to mislead him. This was Solarin's response.

'I never claimed to be scientific,' Solarin said. He lifted his hand, took a quick look at the coin, and then pocketed it. 'Efficient, dependable and, above all, alive. But not scientific.'

'What about your instinct?' Fitz said. 'Why not go with that?' Surely he could tell they were no threat, that the Doctor had told him the truth.

'My instinct is to kill you both and be done with it. Just to be safe, and to remove distractions,' Solarin said. 'Be grateful I'm following random chance instead.'

'Talking of distractions,' the Doctor said quickly, 'I assume that your subsidiary mission is also on hold while you protect the President.'

'You mean the job that Fitz tried to intercept?' Stabilo asked. 'Urgent though that is, I think it can wait.'

'Have you tried just talking to the gentleman concerned?' the Doctor

wondered. 'I'm sure your differences, whatever they are, can be settled amicably.'

Fitz could tell the Doctor was fishing, hoping to find out why they wanted him dead, even if they didn't know he was him. As it were.

But Stabilo was not going to be helpful. 'As you say, a distraction. It can wait. And I have no intention of discussing the matter now.' He turned to Solarin. 'We have more important things to do.'

'The President.'

'Indeed. And the sabotage and murder. There is some purpose to it that we have yet to fathom out.'

'I agree,' the Doctor said. 'And what I suggest is -'

But, before he could suggest anything, there was a roar of rage from across the room. They all turned towards the sound, and saw Bigdog standing by the back wall of the exhibition hall. His huge head was thrown back and he was howling, a mixture of rage and pain and anger. The sound echoed round the room, chilling Fitz to the bone. As they watched, he turned towards them, and even from a distance away they could see the anguish in his eyes.

'I have found her.' Bigdog's voice was choked with tears, the words indistinct though recognisable. 'She is here, as he said.' He collapsed to his knees, his head buried in his paws as he sobbed.

Fitz was not at all sure of the wisdom of approaching the Canvine, especially given his current disposition. But the Doctor and Stabilo both immediately ran across the room. Stabilo paused to murmur to Solarin, and the hit man nodded and made for the exit. One thing fewer to worry about, Fitz thought as he followed the Doctor.

Bigdog was rocking on his haunches, crying quietly now. He looked up as they approached, his paw stretched out to Stabilo. The man took it, and Fitz could tell that there was a friendship here, a bond that went beyond the roles they both played.

'What is it?' Stabilo asked quietly.

In answer Bigdog looked round, staring up at the picture on the wall.

Murdering art . 'I have found her, as he said I would; he growled.

The Doctor was already examining the picture. 'Vermilion,' he said quietly, his finger grazing the tiny figure visible through the window. Fitz looked. The figure was turned again, was facing out of the picture. She seemed to have moved closer to the window, closer to reality. Her face was streaked with painted tears and lined with fear and anguish. It was now unmistakably Vermilion Kenyan.

'That's impossible.' Stabilo was beside them. He shook his head. 'I don't believe it. Some sort of trick.'

'No trick.' Bigdog was drawing himself upright. He seemed to have recovered a little, but his eyes were still brimming with tears and his voice stuck in his throat. 'He told me.'

'Who told you?' asked the Doctor.

'How do you know it is not a trick?' Stabilo said at the same time.

Bigdog looked from one to the other. Then, surprisingly, he placed his paw on Fitz's shoulder, gave it a squeeze. The gesture was not unfriendly, but Fitz almost jumped with surprise and shock. He settled for letting the pain show on his face.

'Come with me,' Bigdog said. 'Fitz, Doctor - I am sorry.'

'Sorry? What about?' the Doctor asked.

But Bigdog was already striding back through the exhibition. He stopped in front of a picture and nodded towards it. Fitz and the Doctor joined him, Stabilo just behind them. Together they stared at the picture.

It was a wide vista, a panoramic view of a farm. There were hills in the distance, birds circling in the sky. On a hillside behind the farm buildings an easel stood alone, a chair in front with a painter's smock hung over it. But none of this was what took Fitz's attention. There was a figure standing alone on the hillside, closer than the artist. She was standing in the middle of what looked like a cornfield. She looked lost and alone, with her arms stretched out wide as if begging for help from some unseen character. She wore jeans and a T-shirt that were totally out of keeping with the depicted environment, a contrast to the period smock draped over the painter's chair.

It was Sam.

'Oh no,' the Doctor breathed.

Fitz felt as if his feet were frozen to the floor, except that the rest of him was struggling to stay upright, to keep balance.

'Your friend,' Stabilo said, his voice a mixture of surprise and disbelief. 'Why would Martinique have painted her in there? How would he have known? She can't have been born when he painted this...' His voice trailed off.

It was Bigdog who answered. He seemed calmer, more collected now. 'She is not part of the painting. Or, rather, she wasn't. That is the real Sam, just as the real Vermilion is now trapped in that other painting.' He exhaled, the breath becoming a low howling moan. "That is what he told me, warned me about.'

'Who?' the Doctor asked again. 'Who told you about this?'

In answer Bigdog turned and pointed across the room. 'He did.'

In the corner, in one of the few areas of shadow, stood a figure. He wore a long coat, and a wide-brimmed hat was pulled down low over his eyes. In his hand he held a grimy piece of cloth that might once have been a handkerchief. As they watched, he stepped out of the shadows and walked slowly towards them.

'I am sorry,' he said. 'Truly I am.'

'Sorry?' Fitz said. 'You're sorry?'

But the Doctor waved him to silence. 'Won't you tell us who you are?' he asked quietly.

'Oh, I think you already know, Doctor,' the man said. 'I have been watching you all for some time now. I think I should explain what little I know about what's going on.'

Chapter Thirteen

Taking a Gamble

There are few things that concentrate and sober the mind as quickly and accurately as the prospect of winning - or losing - a large amount of money. The Doctor knew this, just as he knew that neither Rappare nor Forster was likely to pass up the opportunity to fleece another punter. No matter how drunk they might be. In fact, the more drunk the better.

They were preparing to leave as the Doctor arrived at the casino. And, judging by the debris on the table, they had been there for some time. He knew he was lucky to catch them, and he was not about to let them get away.

So, as Rappare rose and picked up the large rectangular package from the table and Forster pushed his chair back, the Doctor sat down between them. 'Gentlemen,' he announced, 'it is time.'

Forster stopped. Rappare sat down again. 'Time?' he asked foggily.

The Doctor nodded. 'Time.' He looked from one to the other, allowing their puzzled looks to deepen, their brows to furrow. 'Time for the rematch.'

'Perhaps later.' Rappare was getting up again. 'We have rather a lot to do just now.'

'Oh, but you looked settled here for the duration,' the Doctor protested. 'I have some savings, and I gather you are both familiar with a game called joker, or something.'

'Poker?' Forster suggested.

'That was it. Yes.' The Doctor grinned ingenuously. 'I've always wanted to try it.'

Rappare and Forster exchanged glances. Rappare sat down again. 'What sort of savings do you have?' he asked.

The Doctor considered. 'Well,' he said, 'I've been saving this, actually.' He pulled a bank chip from his pocket and tossed it on to the table. It slid into a patch of spilled wine, and stuck there. It was old, discoloured.

'What is it worth?' Forster asked.

Rappare retrieved the chip and turned it over in his hand. 'One of the old ones. No readout or any way of knowing the current value.'

'I have no idea what it's worth exactly,' the Doctor confessed. 'As I said, I've been saving it. Had it for a while now. So it must have accumulated a bit of interest at least.'

'We would need to check the value,' Forster said slowly. He was looking at Rappare, and the other man nodded slightly. 'Interest rates were good to savers after the war. To encourage investment in reparations.'

Good, the Doctor thought, they were going for it. Now, just so long as the chip really was worth something...

Rappare was already waving frantically to a waiter. Eventually he managed to bring one over. 'Sir?' the waiter inquired with only a faint tinge of disappointment. 'I thought you were leaving.'

'Not just yet, I'm afraid.' Rappare held out the chip. 'Can you give us a value on this, please?'

'Certainly.' The waiter undipped a small reader from his belt, and slotted the chip into it. 'Current value,' he murmured pushing a button. He glanced at the small readout screen on the device. And the colour drained from his face. He shook the device, read it again, and then stammered, 'Er, will you excuse me a moment?' He made a brave attempt at a smile. 'I think there's a problem with the link to the bank. I'll just give them a call. Get someone here to help you.' He seemed almost in a daze as he handed the chip back to Rappare.

The Doctor lifted the chip from Rappare's hand and returned it to his pocket. 'Perhaps, while we wait,' he said, 'you could explain the rules to me.' He was grinning again. 'Assume I know nothing,' he said, and Rappare grinned back at him. 'We could play for low stakes until my chip is sorted out. I do have some loose change.' The Doctor tossed a handful of odds and ends from his pocket on to the table and began to sort through them for appropriate currency.

It was not just to pass the time that the Doctor played, of course. He really did need to remind himself of the rules of the game. And also, it

gave him a chance to gauge just how desperate Rappare and Forster were to win his money. Paradoxically, he reckoned a good indication would be the lengths they would go to in order to ensure that they lost the first few - low-paying - hands. They would want to bolster the Doctor's confidence. So he did his own level best to appear the inexperienced tyro and to lose.

It was harder than he anticipated. Rappare and Forster were a good team. They gave the illusion of playing against each other, punctuating the game with acid comments and quips at each other's expense. But all the while they were working in concert.

Their technique for winning, or at the moment losing, was simple enough. They cheated. Both of the Doctor's opponents were past masters at shuffling the cards they wanted to the top or bottom of the pack. They each could deal what appeared to be a fair hand while ensuring that they determined each and every card. And, if all else failed, Rappare had an ultrasonic device concealed in his pocket which sent instructions to the LCD cards, identifying each by a unique code, and told them to change to other cards. The Doctor could just hear the ultrasonics, way above the frequency of human hearing. And he could see Rappare fiddling in his pocket. In case this was not enough, he was quick enough picking up his cards to see a four change into a nine and give him three of a kind.

The Doctor took it all in, deciding on his counter-strategy as he made a show of being surprised and delighted how well he was doing. He made obvious and huge errors of judgement, enjoying seeing his opponents at once congratulate themselves and try to counter the error so that the Doctor could fare well despite it. He pretended to forget the simplest and most fundamental of rules, and even overlooked the fact that he had won a few times.

By the time a large and sweaty but well-dressed man arrived breathless at their table, the Doctor had amassed a significant pile of almost worthless small currency. The newcomer introduced himself as Cy Slavich, and explained that he was the manager of the Vega Central Bank. He seemed to be trying to look down his massive nose at the Doctor as he made his introduction, but, since he had in fact to look round it instead, the effect was somewhat spoiled.

'I gather you have a slight problem with an old chip.'

'No,' the Doctor said. 'No, I don't.'

Slavich blinked. 'I beg your pardon. The waiter -'

'Ah yes,' the Doctor said. "The waiter. He had a problem.'

'Couldn't read the value,' Forster explained. 'Most unusual.'

'Well, perhaps I can try.' Slavich made a point of being careful as he took the chip from the Doctor. 'They can be a bit tricky these old chips. Very clever for their time, mind you. Biometric identification of the owner with stress control so he couldn't be forced to assign it to someone else. Ensured it was done in good part.' He examined the chip. 'Doesn't seem to be damaged,' he observed. 'But, given the nature of the error, I thought I should come in person.' Slavich slotted the chip into his own reader.

'Which was?' Rappare asked.

Slavich pressed a button. 'It gave a false reading of...' His voice tailed off as he read the value on the readout. The three men at the gaming table watched as Slavich shook his reader, took the chip out, put it back in again, pressed the button again, blinked once more. 'So,' he murmured eventually, 'not an error.' His expression was almost blank, inscrutable as he handed the chip back to the Doctor.

'And the value?' the Doctor asked.

Slavich told him.

There was silence round the table for a few moments. Then Rappare laughed. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I thought for a moment there that you said millions '. He shook his head.

But Slavich was not laughing. 'I did,' he said. And repeated the value.

Rappare stopped laughing. He stared at Forster. Forster stared back. Then they both turned to stare at the Doctor.

'As I said -' the Doctor was almost apologetic - 'I've had it a long time.'

'You certainly have.' It was Slavich who spoke. 'Should you need any advice on investment opportunities, that sort of thing...'

'Thank you,' the Doctor said dismissively. 'I'll be sure to let you know.'

Slavich nodded slowly. 'Please excuse me,' he said, bowing slightly and backing away from the table. He caught a waiter's arm as he turned. 'Where's Stabilo?' he hissed. He looked back at the Doctor, smiled unctuously, and dragged the waiter away. 'I need to see Stabilo now!'

'What a pity,' the Doctor said when Slavich was gone. 'I was looking forward to playing for slightly higher stakes, I seem to be doing so well.' He sighed. 'But I don't suppose that either of you has anything that can come close to matching the value of my wager.' He held the chip up between his thumb and forefinger so they could see it. Rappare's eyes seemed to be watering slightly as he looked at it. Forster was licking his lips. Which one of them would crack first, the Doctor wondered.

It was Forster. 'Actually...' he said.

Phillips stood almost to attention and let it wash over him. He had suffered similar outbursts from the President on occasion. The difference this time was that he felt he was in the right. He waited for a pause, then said quickly, 'Madam, I cannot be held responsible for your safety if you keep wandering off.'

'I did not, as you say, wander off. I had my bodyguard. He was quite able to protect me. That's what he is for, after all. Or are you telling me that my own bodyguards are substandard, inadequate, not up to the job?'

'No, madam, of course not.'

'Then there is no problem.'

'At the very least, madam, we need to know where you are. In case of any emergencies, messages -'

'I have my bleeper.'

'Indeed.' Phillips's hands were almost tied in knots of frustration behind his back. 'Being assassinated, please help' -he could just imagine Drexler typing that into her bleeper and pushing SEND with the 'urgent' option selected. Very practical. He made an effort to keep his voice

calm. 'I would be grateful if you could keep me informed of your whereabouts and planned movements. Really, madam, it does make things much easier.'

'Oh? Who for?'

Phillips exhaled slowly and let it all wash over him. 'For everyone, madam.' He was not sure why she was wasting her breath. They both knew she intended to sack him as soon as it was politically prudent. Not long now and he would no longer need to listen to her petty arguments and complaints any more than he would have to tolerate her feeble liberal doctrine.

The fourth chair at the table was occupied by the wrapped painting. On top of it sat the Doctor's gaming chip. Through his muzzy drunkenness, Rappare was still not quite sure how they had got themselves into the situation where they had wagered the painting against the chip. But, unless there was serious upset, they would soon possess both. Despite his certainty of victory, he was perspiring profusely and his knees felt as if they were made of sponge cake.

The Doctor had admired the painting, nodded with interest as Forster explained in slightly slurred terms that he and Rappare owned it in equal share. He had pointed out that, while he appreciated its value, he did not believe it was worth anything like as much as his chip. And then he had told them he was feeling lucky and that of course he would wager his fortune against their nice little painting.

One hand of poker. All or nothing. Rappare dealt. He knew the identity of each card as he laid it down. He had decided that Forster should win - less obvious that way. And it would probably surprise Forster, too, which would help the act.

Somehow knowing that something significant was happening, a small group of people had gathered round the table. They watched intently and politely as Rappare laid down the cards. Three face-up cards first. He dealt himself an obvious no-hoper of a hand. A mixture of suits and values. Forster got a promising run - seven, nine, ten of planets. The Doctor's hand seemed to be the strongest - ten, knave, king of nebulae. But, whereas Forster's hidden cards and additions would give him a straight flush, the Doctor's would leave him with nothing.

But the Doctor did not know that. When he glanced at the cards the first time, he would seem to have a run of four. Only when he looked more closely, and when Rappare had sent the ultrasonic signal to change the card, would he see that his queen of nebulae was in fact a black hole. An easy if heartbreaking mistake for a player new to the game.

Rappare took two new cards himself, discarding two from his hand to make up for them. Forster drew one. It was all he needed. The Doctor also took one, not that it would improve his current hand. But then he would not believe he needed to.

'All done?' Rappare asked.

The other two nodded.

Rappare turned over his cards. 'Well; he said with resignation, 'I'm out, that's for sure.' He nodded to Forster. 'You?'

Forster made a big play of turning over his cards. 'A flush. Not high, but maybe good enough.' He leaned forward in his wheelchair. 'Doctor?'

The Doctor seemed to have been whistling quietly to himself as he watched the other two. Now he smiled and reached for his cards. 'Oh, I think I've done rather well, actually,' he said modestly.

'Really?' Rappare fought to control his humour.

The Doctor flipped over his two hidden cards and arranged his hand in order. 'There you are,' he said. 'Isn't that what you call a royal flush?'

Rappare made his face a mask of disappointment on the Doctor's behalf. 'Oh, my dear Doctor. Very nearly.' He reached across and pushed the cards apart so that they could be clearly seen. 'Yes, so very nearly. But that,' he said as he pointed to one of the cards, 'is the queen of black holes, while the others are all nebulae.'

'Really?' The Doctor was shocked.

'Which means, I'm afraid, that Mr Forster here has the -'

'No it's not,' said a voice close behind Rappare's ear.

'What?' He was annoyed, and turned towards the bystander who had spoken. There was a general mumbling among all the people watching the game now. Rappare was not sure what was going on here. He looked to Forster, but he seemed to have turned a shade of light green and was staring in horror at the cards on the table.

'No it's not,' said the man at Rappare's shoulder again. 'It's the queen of nebulae. The guy's got a royal all right.'

The Doctor was leaning back, grinning across the table at Rappare as he examined the cards again. He could feel the bottom of his stomach sinking away into the floor. His head was beginning to throb, and he was aware that Forster was staring at him in barely suppressed fury.

'Um,' said Rappare. 'Oh. Er, well. Er, yes.' The world seemed a little muzzy right now. Through the haze he could hear the Doctor thanking him for the game and feel his hand being shaken. He could see the Doctor pocketing his gaming chip and scooping up the wrapped Martinique painting. 'Er,' he said again faintly.

The exhibition was once again in near-darkness. As a concession to Fitz's less well-developed night vision, Bigdog had agreed to put the lights on, but only at their faintest setting. It was just enough, now that Fitz's eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom, to find his way to the painting.

Bigdog led the way. Fitz was glad the Canvine was where he could see him. Despite the fact that they seemed to be on the same side now, he was not at all convinced of the wisdom of being alone in a semi-darkened room with a huge wolfman he knew from personal experience to be given to acts of violence. But he wasn't about to lose his bottle when Sam needed his help.

'Are we in time?' Fitz asked, keeping his voice low to match the lights.

Bigdog grunted. 'You heard what the man said; he growled back, equally quietly. 'As long as they retain some personality, so long as the paint has not completely set right through, then there is a chance.'

They stopped in front of the painting where Sam stood in the cornfield. She was looking straight at them, fear and desperation writ large in her

wide eyes and open mouth.

'Your task is easier,' Bigdog said. 'She has been here less time.' He tapped at the ironwork that was poking out of the door of a barn, a lever and the end of a spike of metal. 'And the machinery to free your friend is here.' He turned to face Fitz. 'If only she can get to it,' he said. Then he looked away, towards the back of the exhibition, towards Murdering art. 'But for Vermilion there is no such escape,' he growled.

Fitz was surprised to find he had reached up and put his hand on Bigdog's shoulder. His fingers weren't long enough to give it a sympathetic squeeze, even if he had thought that was a good idea. So he settled for a gentle pat, wondering if the massive creature even felt it.

Then Bigdog was gone, striding towards the painting where his friend was imprisoned. Perhaps for ever.

Of all of them, the President seemed the least worried about the security arrangements. Cage was meeting with Phillips and President Drexler to discuss the final preparations for Drexler's first official function - the official opening reception of the Martinique Experience.

'I think,' Phillips said as it became apparent that President Drexler was not the least bit interested, 'that we can conclude our discussions without burdening madam's busy schedule any further.'

'Oh good.' She did not bother to look up from the papers she was reading as she answered.

'Thank you for your time, ma'am,' Cage said quietly.

This time the President did look up. 'Not at all,' she said. 'I'm sorry if I seem less than interested, but this is all new to me and I must admit most of it is really just background noise to the real work of government. Besides,' she added with a half-smile, 'I know I can leave such matters in the capable hands of Mr Phillips.' The slightest pause before she corrected herself: 'I'm sorry: General Phillips.'

Cage waited until she was alone with Phillips before she asked, 'How do you find working with the President? Very different from the previous regime, I would think.'

'It's not easy,' he admitted. 'She sees no threat from the Canvines. I had thought that once she was here, once she was close to their space, her attitude might change.'

'They're not so bad,' Cage said. She saw Phillips's eyes widen slightly, watched him tense at the comment. 'Apart from the opera, of course,' she added.

'How do you find working with Stabilo?' Phillips countered, refusing to be drawn.

Cage shrugged. 'He's a good man to work for. He knows my strengths, doesn't tread on my toes.' She looked Phillips in the eye, wondering how much he knew about her knowledge of Stabile's background. And his own. 'He's wasted here,' she said.

Phillips said nothing. But his expression was transparent.

'He holds the record for being the youngest person ever to make officer grade, you know,' Cage said. She gave him just enough time to scowl at this before adding, 'Of course you do, I forgot. You held the record before he broke it, didn't you?'

The brief but phlegmatic council of war was a shouting match held in the back office of the antiques shop. The problem was discussed at some volume and several times. 'If you could only cheat properly,' Forster shouted, 'we wouldn't have any problem at all. We'd be rich. We could retire. We wouldn't even need the damned painting.'

'I can cheat properly,' Rappare retorted as loudly. 'I did.'

'Then how come we lost?'

'I don't know. Maybe the face-switcher went wrong.'

'We just tested it. It works fine.'

'Then maybe -' Rappare stopped. When he continued it was at a more reasonable volume. Partly this was because he had realised he couldn't shout any louder and was getting hoarse, and partly it was because he

had just suffered a sudden realisation that made him forget he was supposed to be shouting louder than his interlocutor. 'Maybe the Doctor cheated too.'

'Maybe he cheated? Maybe?' Forster by contrast was still on the shouting kick. 'Of course he sodding cheated.'

'But then,' Rappare continued reasonably, 'the painting's not really his. I mean, he didn't really win. Did he?'

'So? With half the Vega population watching, are you going to argue about it?'

'So...' Rappare was frowning, brows furrowed together in deep concentration. 'So, we'd be entirely justified in stealing the painting back from him.' He smiled as a plan took shape in his mind. 'I mean,' he said, 'he hardly needs the money now, does he?'

Drexler stifled a yawn. Perhaps she had been hard on Phillips and the security woman. This was if anything even more boring.

'And it was, as you know, not until Defying the Angel that his work received any real critical acclaim,' Blanc said. Beside him on the sofa, Tullus Gath took a polite sip of tea.

'Of course.' Drexler replaced her empty cup and made a show of glancing casually at her watch.

'I'm sorry, madam.' Blanc picked up on the gesture at once. 'Are we overstaying our welcome?'

'No, no. You know the subject fascinates me,' she lied. 'But I do need to see General Phillips for a moment about the security arrangements for the reception.' She sighed. 'Boring, I know. But I pride myself that I take an active interest in such things.'

Drexler stood. So they all stood. She ushered Blanc and Gath to the door. 'But you know Phillips, of course,' she said.

Blanc was surprised. 'Madam?'

'From your time on the board of the Research Council. Wasn't Phillips the government liaison officer at the time?'

'You know,' Blanc said as the door was opened for them from the other side, 'I believe he may have been.' He smiled. 'Of course I had little to do with such matters.'

Standing in the middle of a dimly lit room shouting at a figure in a painting was as close to feeling a right Charlie as Fitz could remember getting. The fact that, on the other side of the room, a large upright dog was doing the same thing went some way to easing his embarrassment. But not very far.

He could hear Bigdog's increasingly desperate exhortations to Vermilion to hang on, to listen to him, to give some sign -however small - that she could hear. All the while, Fitz was staring at the painting. Despite concentrating on the tiny figure that was Sam, alone in the cornfield, he felt he knew every brushstroke in the painting by now, every nuance, every splash of light and tone of colour. He was getting to know it so well he hated it.

And he hated it for what it meant to Sam. Could she hear him? How did she feel? How could she possibly feel immortalised in a living death of drying oil paint? The Doctor had explained the process as being akin to the way a matter transmitter transports and then, at a molecular level, reassembles a body at the destination point. Except that here there was a change of state, a modification of the materials used for the reassembly. And Fitz had no idea what a matter transmitter was, which did not help.

So he stood in the middle of a darkened exhibition shouting at a painting. Living art.

And the more he stared at the figure in the field, the more he was uncertain that she had moved at all since he first saw her there; the more he was uncertain that she would or could ever move again. And, perhaps because he was not someone who was either familiar or comfortable with his own emotions and feelings, when Fitz cried it was for Bigdog. What must he be going through? What must he be feeling? How could he be coping with the fact that he had lost his friend for ever, yet could still see her - just out of reach, and perhaps watching his grief

in a desperate inability to escape from her new world?

'Oh Sam,' he sighed, his voice choked. 'Oh Jesus, Sam, if you can hear me, please move. Just a little. Please.' He swallowed with difficulty, breathed with difficulty, spoke through his choked tears. 'Please...'

The room was in darkness. The only light came through the hole where the door had once been, but was now a shattered mess. The pieces had been tidied away, but the new door had not yet arrived.

The Doctor sat in the near-darkness, his back to the TARDIS, and watched the doorway. The painting, unwrapped now, was leaning on a chair. It was one of the few areas that were in light cast from the corridor. A similar effect to that achieved at the exhibition.

The Doctor was not expecting to have to wait long. He was not disappointed. A dark shape appeared in the doorway, nervous, surprised. It was joined almost immediately by another, smaller, lower.

'What happened here?' one of the shapes whispered. 'Where's the door?'

'I don't know,' the smaller shape snapped. Its voice was as recognisable as Forster as its colleague's was as Rappare. 'Look!' it hissed in triumph and a silhouetted hand pointed at the chair where the painting was.

The two of them entered the room. They were wary, cautious, but their attention was obviously on the painting.

'Why's he just left it here?' Rappare asked when they were halfway across the room. 'I don't like it.'

'Who cares? He obviously doesn't know what it is.'

'Oh, I think I do,' the Doctor said. And they froze.

They still had not moved when the lights came on.

'Oh, er, hello,' Rappare said, shuffling his feet in embarrassment.

'You cheated,' Forster said bluntly.

The Doctor was momentarily surprised. 'Well, so did you,' he countered.

'That's not the point,' Forster maintained. 'Your winnings revert to us. The game is off. Void.'

'Yes,' Rappare said. 'A sham from start to finish.'

A sham?' the Doctor asked. He was standing by the painting now, as if claiming it by proximity. 'I'm sorry, are you talking about the card game?' He lifted the painting from the chair and held it up for them to see. 'Or about this fake?'

There was silence for a moment. Then Rappare spluttered. 'Fake? What do you mean, fake? I'll have you know that -'

'That you bought it in good faith, had no idea, would never have guessed. 'The Doctor grinned. 'I know, I know. But I have it on good authority that this is not an original Martinique.'

'Good authority?' Forster's voice was calmer, more reasonable. "That painting has been endorsed, I will have you know, by Tullus Gath and by Henri Blanc himself. And Blanc is, as I'm sure you know, the foremost authority on Martinique's work.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not quite,' he said. 'Not the foremost . 'And he nodded to the figure standing in the corner of the room. The figure they had not noticed until he stepped forward and stood beside the Doctor. He was short, and wore a long, dark, shiny coat and a wide-brimmed hat that shadowed his face.

'You were at the shop,' Rappare said with a frown. 'Who are you?'

In answer, the man removed his hat. Beneath, his dark hair was slicked back across his scalp. His face was suddenly in the light. His eyes were deep set, his nose narrow. His whole complexion seemed slightly pale, as if drained of colour.

Rappare and Forster both looked from the man to the painting the Doctor was still holding. Then back again.

'How do you do?' the man said politely. 'Yes, I did visit your establishment, but I gathered you were rather too busy to talk to me. A

shame,' he said. 'A great shame. The painting's very good, by the way. Obviously not genuine, but a good attempt.'

'Mr Rappare, Mr Forster,' the Doctor said, gently laying down the painting. 'Allow me to introduce Toulour Martinique.'

Chapter Fourteen

Out of the Frame

It was a beautiful day. Birds wheeled in a deep-blue sky where thin fluffy clouds skittered across in front of the hot sun. The corn was waving in the warm breeze, the world was at peace, and time had stopped.

It was a strange feeling. Sam could tell that time was passing, but she was sure that it was passing at a rate far different from she was experiencing. It seemed an effort to move, as if everything took forever. The birds had hardly changed position, and the breeze seemed constant against her cheek rather than the slight variation in intensity and direction she would have expected. The heat of the sun was unrelenting, and the corn was bent in a permanent curve.

Then there was the noise. The shouting.

Someone was shouting in the distance. Very loud, but very far away. So to Sam the sound was faint. Urgent, but muted. It seemed to be coming from in front of her, from the darkness.

Darkness.

That was not right, surely. If she could just turn her head a fraction, if she could just peer into the sun-shy gloom that stretched away in front of the farm... But why worry? It would be so easy to relax, to soak up the heat of the sun as it dried her skin and permeated her body. To sleep.

'Sam, please!'

Her name. She was sure she had heard her name. She craned her head forward since her feet seemed unwilling to move, tried to see out into the gloom, to let her eyes become used to it.

There was someone there. A shape, a silhouette. Large. A man, facing her in the darkness. Sam shuddered, although her body did not move in time to the frisson she felt in her mind. The man was talking, talking to her. What was he saying?

'Sam, you have to move/The voice seemed more urgent now, as if galvanised by the slight movement of her head. She frowned, tried to force her foot to take a step forward.

'That's it - move!' The voice was familiar. Who was it? Who was the dark shape? To the left.' She started to turn, every inch an effort. 'Sorry - right. To your right. There's a barn. It has machinery in it. Go to the barn.'

The world was clear. So clear that Sam could make out every brushstroke, every fleck of canvas. And there was something about that clarity, about the texture that was at once familiar yet unsettling. She struggled to remember what it was as she struggled to make her way through the field towards the barn. It was a long way. A long, long way. She felt as if she were pushing against the breeze, against a gale, upriver, against the tide.

'That's it. You're doing it. Well done, Sam. Oh, thank God!' There was something akin to elation in the voice. Out of the corner of her eye, Sam could see the dark figure clap its hands together in delight. The barn. Concentrate on the barn. She did not know why, but it was important to listen to the voice, to do as it said. To get to the barn.

She passed by the easel, saw that the canvas on it was empty. Almost there now. Almost.

It took an age. Longer, perhaps. But she was there. At last, she was at the doorway, could see inside the barn. The interior was taken up with machinery that seemed familiar. Familiar yet different. It had the same uneven texture as everything else in the world/Two scaffolding structures stood at opposite sides of the barn. On top of each was an extended prong surrounded by coils and wires. They were pointing into the open area in the middle of the barn. Close to the doorway stood a control console, the edge of it poking out into the farmyard outside, pulleys and flywheels protruding from its casing.

As she entered the barn, the voice became fainter and the darkness beyond her world disappeared. Sam paused, unsure what to do next. The control console was bare, an absolute minimum of controls - a single red lever. It was obvious what was expected. Sam reached out through the treacle air and pushed the lever. Then she stumbled slowly into the middle of the barn. Between the projectors.

Fitz had lost sight of Sam when she slowly slipped into the barn. Now he waited, impatient, edgy, worried.

The movement behind him made him jump. He let out a small cry as a hand closed on his shoulder. A hairy hand. A paw. Then he realised it was Bigdog, the Canvine's gesture mirroring his own when they had parted a few minutes - an eternity - ago. He turned to make a comment, something sarcastic about sneaking round in the dark. But the words froze half formed on his lips.

Bigdog was crying.

He made no noise, but his red eyes were wet, the fur round them obviously damp even in the half-light. His body was shaking slightly - Fitz could feel the shudders through the paw that was still clamped on his shoulder as he turned.

'She is gone.' The words seemed forced out of the massive jaw. 'We are too late.'

Fitz sighed, put his hand on Bigdog's forearm. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I really am. I didn't know her, not really. But Jesus, I really am sorry.'

Bigdog nodded slowly, the fur on his head glistening as he moved. 'And what of your friend?' he asked quietly. 'Any hope?'

'Yeah.' Fitz tried to keep the elation out of his voice. It seemed unfair to be so happy. 'Yeah, I think so.'

Before he could explain further, there was a sound from the picture behind them. It started quietly, but quickly grew in volume. A tearing, ripping noise as if the threads of the canvas were breaking. It sounded as if the picture was splitting apart, and the barn seemed to bulge outward towards them as the rending and tearing grew louder. Then, suddenly, Sam was there, falling towards them out of the frame, growing as she tumbled forward, reaching out to break her fall.

Sam stayed on the floor, on her hands and knees, for a few moments. When she pulled herself up, she was gasping for breath. 'I want no comments,' she said between breaths as Fitz helped her to her feet, 'no comments at all about being framed.' She ran her fingers through her hair, looking from Bigdog to Fitz and back. 'Thanks,' she said at last. 'How did you know?'

Fitz was shaking his head in surprise and delight. 'Martinique, the

painter, told us about the machinery in the picture.'

'Martinique? But he's dead. Isn't he?'

'We were unable to save Vermilion,' Bigdog said. The sadness was apparent in his voice.

'Oh, I'm so sorry.' Sam almost had her breath back.

'There was no such apparatus in her painting,' Bigdog explained.

'What was it doing in yours, Sam? Any clues?' Fitz asked.

Sam shook her head. 'What are you laughing at?' she asked as Fitz's face broke into a broad grin.

'You look a picture,' he said.

Before Sam could answer, the main doors swung open. Light from the foyer outside shone across the floor towards them. Bigdog reacted first, dragging both Sam and Fitz behind the nearest display stand and waving for them to keep quiet as the main lights came on.

Peeping round the edge of the stand, Fitz could see Gath and Blanc as they ushered Rappare into the room and made way for Forster's wheelchair. Gath and Blanc seemed anxious to get their guests to the screened-off office area of the hall. But Forster ignored them and wheeled himself into the centre of the hall. 'This will do,' he announced.

Behind him, Blanc was running to catch up, arm outstretched. Gath was watching in obvious anxiety. Rappare seemed somehow to get in Blanc's way as he ran, and they spun round, trying to free themselves from each other in a parody of a dance.

Forster meanwhile was holding up a small control box. 'Fitting that Martinique should be at the centre of his own exhibition,' he said. 'Here is the hologram.'

An image sprang into existence in the midst of the paintings. The Martinique self-portrait. Fitz recognised the deep-set eyes, the pale skin and high forehead. The dark hair was slicked back, and the face seemed to be staring at Fitz. Instinctively, he ducked back behind the screen.

'Not in here,' Blanc was calling. But he was obviously too late.

'Why ever not?' Rappare asked. 'You wanted to examine the hologram in detail. To be sure, to check the brushwork. Do so.'

There was a pause, then Forster's voice said, 'I should point out that, in light of the fact that your collection is so obviously the best place for the painting, and with the Presidential reception coming up, we have revised our asking price for the painting. Provided it is displayed for the opening, together with a suitable note of thanks, of course.'

'We are willing,' Rappare said, 'to take ten per cent less than we originally asked.'

Fitz could hear the gasp from Blanc as Forster added, 'Call it a gesture of goodwill.'

'Come on,' Bigdog hissed close to Fitz's ear. 'We can slip away while they are haggling over the price.'

Stabilo was not happy at being interrupted in his own office. He was listening to Cage as she went through the security arrangements Phillips was proposing for the reception. As he had expected, they were inadequate. This, coupled with the fact that the reception looked likely to be brought forward, meant that he was glad they had Hazard Solarin watching the President's back.

Cage had almost finished, when the door was shoved open. Stabilo leapt to his feet, at once back in his persona and knitting his fingers in anxiety and worry. 'How dare you disturb me when I am in conference?' he said, sounding like someone trying to muster some sense of authority. Then he sighed and his hands were still. 'Oh, it's you.' He sat down heavily. 'What is it?'

Slavich was out of breath. 'Thank goodness I've found you at last. Where have you been?'

'Never mind that. What's the problem?' Cage demanded.

'I've found him.' Slavich almost fell into the nearest chair, wiping his face with a soggy handkerchief. 'He was in the casino - asked for a valuation

of all things. Can you believe it?'

'I don't know if we can or not,' Stabilo said. 'I don't have a clue what you're talking about.'

'The chip. The man with the chip. The one this Hazard character was supposed to deal with.'

'What about him?'

'Well he's still on the loose. He didn't seem to know what the thing was worth, but I'm afraid he does now.' Slavich shook his head. 'If he should decide to -'

'Where is he?' Cage asked. 'Maybe we could talk to him, explain.'

'Get real,' Stabilo told her.

'He was in the casino. Not any more, though.' Slavich had most of his breath back now. 'He doesn't look anything like the image. Maybe the chip was sold on. This guy calls himself the Doctor.'

'The Doctor?' Stabilo was astonished. Tall and naive-looking with curls of brown hair and a tailor nobody can have recommended?'

'That's him.'

Stabilo put his hands over his face, rubbed at his forehead, then his eyes, finally his cheeks as he drew his fingertips down. 'This could change everything,' he said quietly.

Blanc closed the door after Rappare and Forster, then turned back to Gath. They both knew what was coming. Blanc tried to keep his expression neutral. He could see the worry and nerves etched into Gath's face.

Within seconds of the door closing, it started. The ripping sound seemed to come from all around them and the hall was suddenly alive with movement. As far as the eye could see, paintings bulged, distorted, shimmered. Creatures were stepping out of the pictures, crowding towards Blanc and Gath even as they tried to wave the shapes back.

The great Devourer from Defying the Angel stepped forward, its cloven feet cracking on the floor as it approached Blanc. The other creatures held back, either from deference or fear of their self-appointed leader.

'What is this?' the Devourer demanded. Its angry voice echoed round exhibition hall. Display stands nearby shook as he passed them. Gath backed away, but Blanc held his ground. 'You keep this from us?' the Devourer demanded.

'I kept nothing from you.' Blanc still stood firm, though his voice trembled as the Devourer stepped up to him. 'We would have told you, but we had to be certain.'

'Certain?' the Devourer sneered. It turned to the creatures crowding behind, as if garnering support. 'You look to deny us the chance to meet with our creator.'

'I did not want you to be disappointed. I share your anticipation, your desire to see the great creator again.' He turned towards Gath for support. But her expression gave the lie to his mock enthusiasm, and he quickly turned back to the Devourer. 'But we don't know, we are not certain.'

'What is there to know?'

Blanc blustered. 'We had to be sure that the picture really existed. That it was genuine. Even now, with that proof we cannot be certain that it was produced with the right techniques, that Martinique lives within it. Or that he can escape. He did not originate within, like you - he can't learn as you have done to move between the worlds at will. He would need help. We won't know the state of things until we have the painting here, for real.'

'So you deceive us, make us wait?'

'For your own sake.' Blanc was making frantic gestures behind his back, hoping that Gath would notice and understand. He dared not look behind him to see if she had gone. 'Let us not forget who is in charge here,' he warned, hoping there was an edge to his voice.

The Devourer laughed. A short, gruff noise cut short abruptly as it looked past Blanc. The other creatures were looking past him too, backing away

slightly, the fear apparent in their twisted faces.

Blanc could hear Oath's footsteps approaching, but still he did not turn. He kept his eyes fixed on the Devourer, met its gaze, saw the hatred that burned within its eyes. Only when Gath was right beside him, the firebrand held up so he could feel the heat from it, did he turn. And then just for long enough to take the flaming torch and hold it aloft.

The Devourer took a step backward. Its face was contorted with a mixture of rage and terror. And Blanc knew that the danger was past. At least for now.

It took the Doctor only a short while to satisfy himself that Sam was suffering no ill effects from her incarceration in the painting. Then he hugged her tight, just for a second. Fitz shuffled his feet, embarrassed, while Martinique spoke quietly to Bigdog.

'So how did I get in there?' Sam asked Martinique once the introductions were done.

Martinique smiled, tiny lines appearing round his mouth like cracks in plaster. 'It is a process not unlike matter transmission,' he said. 'There was really no truth in the stories about black magic and the occult, but it was good for publicity. No, it is very scientific. Your atoms and molecules, your genetic traces - RNA, DNA - your whole being in fact is reconstituted within the painting as an artefact of the painting. Either your worldly self is transferred into the picture, or there are two forms. Forever bound together, forever linked. The materials are changed, but the essential you remains the same.'

'And the process whereby the creatures leave the paintings?' the Doctor asked. 'Essentially the same in reverse, I assume. They can be drawn into our world just as Sam here was sent into theirs. Though the creatures do seem to retain characteristics of the environment they are from.'

Martinique nodded. 'Just as your friend here retained her own persona when she was within the painting. They are formed from the materials of this world that most closely match their original constituency within the painting.'

'Oil paint and canvas?' Fitz asked.

'Indeed.'

'Hence Fitz could rip one with a knife,' the Doctor said, demonstrating with his hand and an imaginary knife, 'while another left smudges.' He nodded. 'Elegant. A convoluted system, but an elegant solution.'

'Thank you. They can come and go as they wish, once they know how, or they may be called forth. But people from our world, once within the painting, have no chance to learn the technique unless they are helped. So they are trapped unless released with the right equipment.'

'So how do we finish these monsters off?' Fitz asked.

Martinique shook his head. 'No,' he said, 'oh no. These are my creations. My children. I gave them life, form, even speech. They may be used for evil purposes, but they are not in themselves evil. I won't have that.' He walked slowly across to the doorway.

'You won't help us?' Bigdog asked, amazed.

'I won't prevent you from doing whatever you believe is best,' Martinique said softly as he stood beside the broken hinges and splintered remains of the door frame. 'But you cannot ask me to destroy that which I have created.' And with that, he was gone.

'It doesn't matter,' the Doctor said as soon as Martinique had left. 'We know all we need to from him, I think. Now we just need Rappare and Forster.'

'You've got a plan,' Sam said. It was a statement rather than a question.

'Sort of. Yes. Though it's not all mine.' The Doctor waved a hand in the air. 'But you have to adapt and adopt. Make do with what you have.'

'So whose plan is it?' Fitz asked.

As he finished speaking, Forster wheeled into the room, Rappare close behind him.

'Theirs,' the Doctor said.

'It's all set,' Forster told them. 'If you will let us have it, Doctor, we will take the painting along and Gath will set it up ready for the reception.'

'Which has been brought forward,' Rappare said. 'Some excuse about security, apparently.' He checked his watch. 'It should start in about -'

'About an hour.' Stabilo was standing in the doorway. 'That was what I came to tell you. Cage is already sorting out the security checks with Phillips and his lot.'

The Doctor was frowning, tapping his index finger against his chin. 'Doesn't give us much time to sort things out,' he said. 'I suppose we'll have to sit out the reception and play our cards as and when we can. I don't want anyone getting their fingers burned, as it were.' He grinned at Rappare as if he had made a joke.

'What exactly are you planning, Doctor?' Stabilo asked. His voice was gruff, impatient. 'I think I have a right to know. In fact, I think I probably have a right of veto.'

Rappare and Forster were both staring at Stabilo open-mouthed, and Fitz realised they had never seen him like this before - focused, in charge. They were used to the ineffectual fop that dithered round the casino and hotel.

'What are you two jokers staring at?' Stabilo demanded.

Rappare gulped. 'Do you have a twin brother?' he asked nervously. 'By any chance?'

Stabilo ignored him, and turned back to the Doctor. 'Well?'

'Yes,' the Doctor replied. 'Well. What I was proposing was to threaten Gath and Blanc and demand to know what they're really up to. Having their creatures wander about engaged in petty sabotage, albeit together with the odd murder, doesn't seem a terribly productive use of them.'

'Threaten them?' Stabilo asked. 'How?'

'I thought I'd tell them that, if they don't own up, then I'll burn their paintings.' The Doctor smiled apologetically. 'Actually.'

'You'd what?' Fitz said.

'How?' Sam asked.

'Good plan,' Bigdog growled.

'I think we need just a bit more detail,' Stabilo said.

'With an incendiary device .'The Doctor shrugged.'Since we have one handy.'

'An incend-' Stabilo was aghast.'No chance, Doctor. Phillips has checks on every door.You wouldn't get anything that can ignite into that hall.'

It was Forster who answered. He was looking down, apparently interested in his hands which were folded in his lap.'It's there already,' he said quietly.'It's sewn into the threads of the backing material of Murdering art '.

Everyone stared at him. Everyone except Rappare and the Doctor, who exchanged glances.

'Perhaps I'd better explain,' the Doctor said.

'Perhaps you had,' Stabilo agreed.

'Our friends here -' he indicated Forster and Rappare - 'have been trying to sell a fake Martinique painting to Mr Blanc.'

'It's a fake?' Bigdog asked in surprise.

Rappare polished his nails modestly on his lapel.'A talent,' he said absently.

'Indeed,' the Doctor agreed. 'Misdirected, but a talent nonetheless. But to fake a Martinique he needed to examine one of the genuine paintings. So they stole Murdering art from the exhibition.'

'You stole it?' Stabilo's voice was laced with anger.

'We gave it back,' Forster protested. 'When we heard of the, er, trouble, we left it nearby so it would be found and returned.'

'But not before you had sewn an incendiary strip into its backing cloth,'

the Doctor pointed out.

'Why?' Fitz was lost. 'What the hell for?'

'Greed, mainly,' the Doctor said with a sigh. "They wanted more money than the painting would realistically be worth even if it were genuine.' He looked at Stabilo. 'It's a trick I gather they have worked before.'

Rappare did not make eye contact with anyone as he spoke. 'If some or all of the Martiniques that Blanc has are destroyed, it will force up the value of any others in existence. Considerably.'

'And he would be desperate for something to show at the exhibition, especially with the President's interest and attendance.'

Stabilo was visibly seething. 'On my station,' he thundered. 'You dare to -'

'Please.' The Doctor cut him off. 'It's handy for us. Recriminations later. First things first. There are things happening here that we need to understand. To uncover.' He looked round at everyone. 'Demontage,' he said quietly.

'Gesundheit .' Fitz said.

'I beg your pardon?' Sam asked.

'Demontage,' the Doctor repeated. "That's what we need.'

'French?' Sam asked.

'Yes. It's the opposite of montage. Instead of building up a picture layer by layer, you peel the layers away to reveal what's beneath. I think it's time we found out what's behind Blanc's actions.' He turned to Stabilo. 'Why did they sabotage your listening post and kill your people? Why disrupt the power supply in a way that was trivial to fix?' Next he addressed Bigdog. 'And is it coincidence that these things just happened to look as if your people were responsible?'

'The public need to be told,' Fitz agreed. 'So what do we do, just ask Blanc and Gath what the scam is?'

'In effect, yes.'

'But Doctor, you cannot burn the painting,' Bigdog protested. 'Vermilion...'

'I know,' the Doctor said gently. 'If there were any hope, any hope at all, I wouldn't even consider it. But I hope it won't come to that, that the threat will be enough.'

'And you think that will work?' Bigdog asked.

'I think so. Blanc is pretty proud of his paintings. Do you have the remote?' he asked Rappare.

In answer, Rappare held up a small metal box with buttons on one side.

'Good. Then we can make a deal. And this reception may be just the venue.'

'We need to set up the fake painting,' Forster said. 'I assume you still want us to display it, to let Blanc have it.'

'It's your credentials. It gets you in,' the Doctor said. 'Just make sure you don't lose Pandora's box, there.'

The area outside the exhibition hall had been transformed. Long tables were set up in front of the railing by the central well. They were set with a huge buffet and glasses of wine and fruit juice. Presidential security guards stood at each of the entrances and by the lift doors, ready to check invitations and search guests as they arrived.

But so far there were only Blanc and Gath. General Phillips was talking quietly with Blanc while Gath nervously straightened plates of food and piles of napkins. The guards by the door to the main corridor straightened as Rappare and Forster appeared. Rappare was carrying the painting, still wrapped.

'I'm afraid the reception is not due to start just yet, sir,' one of the guards said. He held out his hand to stop Rappare from approaching any closer.

'That's all right,' Blanc called over. 'They have a painting which we need to set up.'

'Sir.'The guard let his hand drop.'Sorry, sir,' he said to Rappare.

Rappare smiled. 'Not at all. An easy mistake. Now, if you will excuse me.' He pushed past the guard with a patronising sniff.

The guard was not amused.'Just a moment, sir.'The last word sounded suspiciously like an afterthought.

'What now?' Forster demanded.

For answer the guard pulled a long cylindrical wand from a holster at his hip. The end of the wand was attached by a curled wire to a power pack in the base of the holder. 'Just a routine check, sir.' He ran the wand over the package that Rappare held .Then he checked Rappare himself. Rappare held his breath.

'Fine,' the guard said at last. 'You can go through.'

'Thank you.' Rappare set off towards Blanc. Forster started after him.

'Not you, sir. Just a quick check, if you don't mind.'

'I'm an invalid,' Forster protested. He thumped the armrest of his chair. 'What do you think this is, a suicide bomb?'

'Won't take a moment, sir,' the guard said as if Forster had not spoken.

Forster grunted in disgust and folded his arms tight.

'What is this?' the guard asked after a moment.

'What?'

'This, sir.'The guard was holding a small box. It was made of metal, with buttons set in one side. The guard had lifted in from the seat where it had been nestling beside Forster's leg.

'That's mine.' Forster went to take it, but the guard pulled it away.

'Yes, sir. But what is it?'

'Er, power pack. Backup supply' Forster stammered. 'For the wheelchair.You plug it in at the back, press the big red button and -' He

broke off as the guard examined the button. 'Not now,' he shouted.

The guard looked up surprised.

Forster coughed. He looked across at Rappare, who was returning to see what the hold-up was. 'You'll discharge it if you're not careful.' He went to take the box again.

But again the guard held on to it. 'That's fine, sir.'

'Then can I have it back.'

The guard passed the box to a colleague, taking a clipboard from the other guard in exchange. 'Of course you can, sir,' he said. His tone was reasonable, mannered. 'Straight after the reception. If you could just sign here to says it's yours?'

Chapter Fifteen

Art Deception

The main doors to the exhibition were closed, and the foyer area outside already seemed crowded. The President was due in a few minutes, and Solarin had decided (on the flip of a coin) to take the slight risk of arriving ahead of her rather than following and keeping her in sight.

He sauntered into the reception, sipping white wine and nodding to people he did not know as if they were old and valued friends.

'Excuse me, sir.' The guard caught up with him before he had taken three steps. 'May I see your invitation?'

'Oh, of course.' Hazard Solarin was deference itself. 'Could you hold this for me a moment?' He handed his wine to one of the guards while he patted his pockets and eventually retrieved the invitation card he had printed out from the invitation Stabilo had forwarded to him.

'Thank you, sir.' The guard scanned it briefly, then handed it back. He drew out the security wand and Solarin obligingly raised his arms as the guard ran it round his body. 'You're clear, sir,' the guard said as he finished.

'Thank you.' Solarin lowered his arms and took back his drink from the second guard. If the guard had noticed that the goblet Solarin was drinking from was a different design from the others, or that it was quite heavy for its size, he did not mention it. Solarin sipped his wine, nodded to the guards, and wandered off to mingle.

'The stuff they serve at these events is just awful,' the Doctor confided to the guard. 'You would not believe how it offends the palate of a connoisseur such as myself.' He shook his head in sadness.

'Unbelievable,' he said, apparently suppressing a hiccup. 'You can keep my electric toothbrush, though,' he added, apparently unconcerned. The Doctor tapped the end of his sonic screwdriver, which the guard had removed from the Doctor's pocket.

The guard handed him back his silver hip flask without comment, offering him a sheet to sign to say the toothbrush was his own property

and would be returned immediately after the reception.

Fitz and Sam already had drinks by the time the Doctor caught up with them. Fitz was holding a glass of wine, Sam a fruit juice that was so pink it seemed to glow in the glass.

'Drink up,' the Doctor said before either of them could utter a word. He lifted a glass of wine from a nearby table. 'Cheerio,' he said and downed it in one. Then he smacked his lips together and blinked rapidly several times.

'You're desperate, aren't you?' Fitz observed.

'Drink up,' the Doctor repeated.

'I think I'll pace myself,' Fitz replied.

'What's the hurry?' Sam asked.

'Drink up. I've got something else for you here.' He tugged his coat aside and flashed them a view of the hip flask in his inside pocket. 'Quickly now.'

Fitz gulped down his wine. "This had better be good," he said.

'I'm not sure I want any, Doctor,' Sam said. But all the same she downed her juice.

'Right, good.' The Doctor huddled in close, drawing in his friends like guilty schoolchildren swapping illicit chocolate at playtime. He glanced round furtively, then handed his glass to Fitz to hold so he could pull out his hip flask. He unstopped it, and poured a measure of clear liquid into each of the glasses. Then he looked round again before returning the depleted flask to his pocket and reclaiming his own glass.

Fitz sniffed experimentally at the liquid. 'Phew!' He drew his nose away quickly. 'That'll put hairs on your chest.' He glanced at Sam. 'Or something.' He raised the glass to his lips.

'Don't drink it!' shrieked the Doctor, pulling Fitz's hand. His mouth followed the glass for a moment before giving up.

'What? Why not?'

The Doctor sighed and shook his head. 'It's not for consumption. It's insurance. Backup. Contingency.'

Fitz looked at Sam. She raised her eyebrows and gave a slight shake of her head.

'Oh,' said Fitz. 'Right. But what if I really do want a drink? If there's a toast, say?' He waited, but it was obvious the Doctor would say no more for the moment. So he looked round instead. The area was crowded. In the middle of the crowd, on his own though surrounded by people, was Solarin. 'I see our friend's here,' Fitz said to the Doctor and Sam.

'And I see he's brought his own drink,' the Doctor pointed out. 'Or, at any rate, his own glass.'

'He's not the only friend we have here,' Sam said. 'Or maybe acquaintance is more accurate.'

Rappare was pushing his way through the crowd towards them, excusing himself as he knocked into people's elbows and arms, leaving a trail of turning heads and spilled wine.

'At last,' he said as he reached them. 'I've been waiting for you.'

'Well, here we are,' Sam said.

He ignored her and addressed the Doctor in a stage whisper. 'We have a problem.'

The Doctor's smile collapsed into a look of resignation. 'Don't tell me you lost the remote-control device.'

'No,' Rappare said, indignant.

'Thank goodness for that. We have very little plan left without it.'

'I gave it to Forster to look after,' Rappare said. 'And he lost it.'

Before the Doctor could reply, a group of security guards led by Cassey Cage pushed their way through the crowd towards them. 'Make way,

please,' Cage called out as they shuffled people aside, forming a corridor across the foyer area. She paused for the briefest moment in front of the Doctor, then gently pushed him back as well. 'Excuse me, please, sir.'

'What's going on?' Sam asked.

'The President is arriving,' Cage said as she moved on, parting the crowd.

They stood back deferentially, waiting in a hushed silence with everyone else. A path was cleared to the main doors to the exhibition hall, Blanc and Gath waiting eagerly at the doorway. Cage stood beside them, her eyes wandering warily over the crowd as they waited.

They did not have to wait long. General Browning Phillips appeared at the end of the corridor, an armed guard either side of him. His face was set into a slight smile as he walked between the people, not acknowledging them. And behind him came the President, also flanked by armed guards, though they walked slightly behind her so she could nod and smile at the people as she passed.

Fitz watched her, absorbed a professional smile thrown in his direction and grinned back. As he turned to follow the President's progress he caught sight of Bigdog on the opposite side of the area, also watching. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments, just long enough for each to acknowledge the other's presence. Then the President arrived at the doors, and turned to address the assembled dignitaries.

'Thank you all for coming.' President Drexler's voice was clear and strong. 'I know that some of you share my intense appreciation of the works of Toulour Martinique.'

'Talking of whom,' whispered Sam, 'where is he?'

'...others of fine wine.' She took the proffered glass from Tullus Gath, and sipped as the crowd politely laughed.

'I don't know,' the Doctor admitted. 'But I suspect he's not far away.'

'I do intend,' the President was saying, 'that my visit to Vega combine pleasure with business. But more of that later. For the moment, the agenda is pleasure. In particular the remarkable exhibition that Henri

Blanc and his assistant Tullus Gath - 'she nodded gratitude and appreciation to each as she named them - 'have set up here for us. Of particular interest will be the recently discovered self-portrait of the artist. For the chance to see that on display for the first time ever, we owe a debt of thanks to Mr Foster and Mr Repair.' Rappare grunted.

The President meanwhile, oblivious of her mistake, turned towards the doors, gesturing to Blanc and Gath to join her. 'Shall we?' she asked quietly.

'Indeed, ma'am.' Blanc swung the doors open, and they stepped inside.

The crowd followed, flowing through the doors after the President like a well-behaved wave. Fitz allowed himself to be swept along with the Doctor and Sam. Rappare was close by, and Fitz caught a brief glimpse of Forster struggling along in his wheelchair as people bumped into and collided with him.

The inside of the exhibition was no surprise to Fitz of course. The only change from the last time he had been here was the Martinique self-portrait - faked self-portrait - standing on a simple easel at the start of the exhibition, illuminated by a strong spotlight.

For several minutes, people milled around and examined the paintings. They made knowledgeable noises about the style, the subject matter, the technique. Fitz caught sight of Stabulo listening attentively to a lecture from an elderly lady. Forster and Rappare were standing beside the self-portrait accepting congratulations. Solarin was occasionally visible, never far from the President. Phillips, Cage and the guards made discreet circuits of the exhibition, keeping an eye on everyone.

The moment the sound started, all other noise seemed to cease. Conversations stopped, heads turned, mouths opened in surprise and anxiety. It was a scraping, ripping sound, as if someone were slowly, deliberately tearing one of the paintings in two. Even as all other noise stopped, the sound grew in volume. And then another tearing started. And another. The noise seemed to rend the air, to come from all around the hall.

And, as the guests turned and looked for the source of the sound, they saw the paintings bulge and ripple. All through the exhibition, the paintings were coming to life. Or, rather, the creatures within the paintings were coming to life, stepping out of the frames and out into the

hall. The whole process seemed to take place in slow motion as they forced their way into the real world, the canvas distorting and bending as they pushed through.

The first sound apart from the tearing and rending was the crash of broken glass as someone dropped their drink in surprise. Immediately it was followed by more as others also dropped their glasses. The guests were moving back towards the main entrance, feet now crunching on broken glass as they shuffled slowly, incredulously, backwards. Then, almost as one, they seemed to realise that the creatures were not only behind them and turned.

A shot rang out, quickly followed by several more. The bullets pinged away into the darkness at the edge of the room without apparent effect.

'Hold your fire,' Phillips called out above the din. 'Wait until we know what's happening here.'

As if playing to the captive audience, the Devourer of Souls stepped down from Defying the Angel, pulling itself up to its full massive height, saliva dripping from its jaw and its curled horns stretching up out of reach of the spotlights. Behind it, Blanc and Gath stood smiling at their guests.

The Doctor, Sam and Fitz were in the middle of the crowd as it drew in, tried to shrink in size. They were almost squashed as people pressed in from all sides. Bigdog was somewhere nearby. Solarin was just visible, pushing his way towards where the President stood as open-mouth amazed as everyone else. Beside her Phillips did his best to keep the others back. Still he did not give the order to fire.

'Whatever you do,' the Doctor hissed in Fitz's ear, 'don't drop your glass.'

Fitz did not reply. But he managed to catch Sam's eye, and read in her expression that this had not been her first thought or priority either. He turned back towards the Doctor, who was now staring off apparently into space, looking out of the group of people and into the darkness beyond the paintings. Fitz followed his gaze, and just for a second he thought he caught a glimpse of a figure standing by the back wall. A figure wearing a long, dark coat, and with a pale, cracked face.

Then the creatures attacked.

There was no warning. They just stepped up to the people huddled together in the middle of the room, and started slashing at them with extended claws, biting into them with massive, sharp teeth.

The first casualties collapsed in screaming, bleeding heaps. Immediately the guards round the President fired their weapons, without waiting for explicit orders from Phillips. The creatures nearest the group, reaching into it and pulling out victims, staggered slightly under the impact. But it did not stop them. They came forward again, the holes torn in their bodies clearly visible with the light shining through from behind. Strips of canvas flapped free where the bullets had torn through and crashed into obstructions beyond - wall, paintings, exhibition stands.

'They're going for the President,' the Doctor said grimly. He reached out through the screaming crowd and grabbed Rappare by the oily hair. 'What happened to the device?' he shouted above the noise. 'Who took it? Who has it?'

A group of the creatures had almost reached Drexler now. Her guards were pulled out and tossed aside, ripped and bleeding. Phillips and Cage were both shouting instructions; guards stood in front of the President, the fear evident across their faces. Then the last of them was pulled away, and the first of the creatures lunged forward.

It was a grotesque goblin-like monster. Not large, but with stubby horns protruding from a bald scalp. Its webbed fingers ended in long talons. Its bare feet slapped on the wet floor as it stepped up to the President, a leer of pure malice across its painted face. The cackle of malevolent laughter that escaped from its mouth was audible across the screaming and shouting. It raised a clawed hand and slashed down at Drexler.

The hand never reached her. Before it was halfway there, Solarin shouldered the President aside and stood in front of her. He pulled the goblet he was holding apart, wine spilling into the mess on the floor as he drew the thin-bladed glass knife from the stem. And slashed upward.

The glass edge met the goblin creature's forearm and sliced neatly through it. The creature screamed, perhaps in pain, perhaps in anger, perhaps in surprise, as its hand dropped to the floor. But Solarin ignored the sound, and lunged forward. His stab had as little effect as the bullets from the guards' guns. But with the point embedded in the goblin's stomach he dragged the glass knife upward, tearing, ripping, cleaving. The goblin seemed to part as if along a seam. Both halves of its mouth

were screaming as it collapsed writhing to the floor. Solarin stepped over the flimsy body, slashing sideways at the next creature. And the next.

'I think it's time we lent a hand,' the Doctor said.

'Break our glasses?' Sam suggested.

He stared at her as if she were mad. 'Of course not. Throw the paint stripper.'

'Paint stripper?' Sam asked.

Fitz lifted his glass as if in a toast. 'Paint stripper,' he agreed, as if he had suspected as much all along.

The creatures were backing away from the milling crowd. They had formed a ring around Solarin. A ring that was slowly closing in. He turned and slashed as fast as he could, lunging deeply at them. But every now and then one of the creatures managed to reach out and nip him, scratch his face or his arm, try to knock the knife from his grasp.

The Doctor forced his way through the creatures before they realised what was happening and stood back to back with Solarin. Sam followed him a moment later.

'What the hell,' Fitz thought, and followed Sam. Behind him he was barely aware of people searching the floor for broken glass they could use as weapons, of Blanc and Gath shouting instructions to their creatures, of Cage trying to rally support.

Then he was in the middle of the creatures, glass cupped in his trembling hands like some votive offering. Precious.

'The device,' the Doctor was shouting to Rappare, who was keeping well back from the action. 'Find the device.'

Then the Doctor stepped smartly towards the biggest of the creatures harrying Solarin, and threw the liquid from his glass full in its face.

The effect was immediate and unpleasant. The creature staggered back, claws clutched over its dripping features. The paint was running in viscous rivers down its cheeks, features and countenance, distorting and dripping like a Salvador Dali. Colours blended into an ugly red mush as

the paint mixed and melted. Then the creature collapsed to its knees. Its face flapped, useless stained canvas now, as its detail dripped and dropped away.

The other creatures backed away in terror as Sam and Fitz held their glasses ready.

For a while it seemed like they were beaten. The creatures were retreating as the Doctor, Sam, Fitz and Solarin advanced slowly on them. From somewhere behind a gunshot rang out, then another. Cage was firing at one of the creatures, grouping the bullets close together so that the canvas was eaten away and the creature's chest began to disappear as more and more holes were torn in it.

'Gath and Blanc,' Sam called, her voice barely audible above the noise. 'This was your plan all along, wasn't it?'

But there was no answer. Gath and Blanc were behind the creatures, shouting at them, ordering them forward. And through their cowering ranks stepped the Devourer. It ignored the bullets that tore at its body, swatted aside a stray guard who stabbed at it with the broken remains of a glass. It caught Solarin's wrist easily as he wielded the glass knife, threw him across the floor.

Solarin skidded to a halt and was immediately on his feet. Fitz could see him look all round. He had dropped the glass knife as he fell, but his attention was on the fact that he was close to the doorway. And there was nothing between him and the door. For a second, Fitz thought he was going to run, to save himself. But instead he pulled a pair of dice from his pocket and rolled them on the floor. He watched them roll to a stop, and nodded in apparent satisfaction. Then Solarin turned towards the door.

The Devourer was almost on them now. The Doctor stood firm, despite having used his paint stripper. Sam had thrown hers at the closest creature soon after the Doctor. Only Fitz was left. He stepped in front of the Devourer and raised his glass. His attention was focused, on the Devourer's face, watching, aiming. Not keeping track of where the creature's huge claw was going. It connected with Fitz's glass and sent it flying across the room. At the same moment, the Devourer let out a cry of triumph and reached for Fitz.

Fitz stood rooted to the spot as the claw slashed down at him. He could

make out the incredible detail in the paintwork, almost see the brushstrokes that were hurtling towards him. Then without warning he was knocked aside and fell heavily to the floor. Solarin was standing above him, wrestling with the Devourer's arm.

'I thought you'd buggered off,' Fitz said. And at once thought what a stupid observation this was.

'You can't always play the safe odds,' Solarin grunted. He was losing the battle, bending backward under the force of the Devourer's arm. Then the huge creature knocked him aside and stepped forward, leaning over Solarin's prone body.

'Typical,' Fitz heard the hit man say, his voice surprisingly calm. 'The one time I go with instinct rather than luck, it gets me killed.' Then the Devourer's arm flashed down, catching Solarin across the side of the head. Lines of angry red appeared along Solarin's cheek, stretching up into his hair. He was reaching out, grabbing for the Devourer, trying to close his hands round the huge creature's throat. But they were obviously losing their grip, his strength ebbing away with the blood that was now pooling round his head. Solarin slumped backward, his hands still stretched up above him as the Devourer broke free and reared up. Then Solarin's arms flopped down, slapping against the floor beside his still body.

'The door,' the Doctor's voice hissed in Fitz's ear. 'Make for the door.'

Fitz turned and ran. He collided almost at once with something and went flying. He picked himself up, glancing back to see what he had hit.

It was a wheelchair. It was toppled on to its side, the wheel now uppermost, spinning uselessly. The fingers of a dead hand brushed limply against the wheel as it turned. Fitz felt a pressure behind his eyes. He blinked it away and continued running.

The whole crowd was stumbling, almost running for the door. The Devourer's actions and Solarin's death had galvanised the monsters into action again, but had also left the way to the main doors open. Cage and a few others hung back, protecting the rear of the depleted crowd of dignitaries the best they could as they ran to the doors.

But, while the creatures were behind them now, Gath and Blanc were standing halfway between them and the doors, alerted to the danger by

Solarin's near-escape. Gath held a large gun, taken from one of the guards' bodies. Blanc was carrying a firebrand, which burned fiercely with a strong smoky flame. The crowd stopped.

For a short while there was silence. The group of people were stuck between the slowly advancing creatures and Blanc and Gath. The surviving guards and Cage were at the back of the group, more concerned with the creatures than the human threat.

Then Harris Stabilo stumbled out of the middle of the group. He was in a state. His clothes were ripped and stained. His face was a mask of fear and anxiety. The lace trim from one cuff dangled pathetically as he waving his hands frantically and stammered at Blanc and Gath.

'Oh please,' he begged, his voice a high-pitched whine. 'Please don't kill us. Not me. I don't want to die. Please.' He almost crawled up to them, shuffling on his knees for part of the way.

Blanc watched him, an amused smile curling his lips. 'You pathetic worm,' he laughed. 'Look at you. A whinging, terrified apology for humanity. Where's your flamboyant charm now, then?'

'Please,' Stabilo repeated, his voice almost a sob. 'Let me go. I'm not ready to die. Not yet. I can't - I can't -' His voice dissolved into a flood of tears. 'I can't bear it. Not any more.' He was at Blanc's feet, clutching at the man's leg, holding on tightly as he sobbed.

Blanc made to push Stabilo away, to shake him off. Gath half watched, also keeping her gun aimed at the survivors. Which was why she was slow to react.

Stabilo's sobs cut off abruptly. His voice was a strong snarl as he tightened his grip suddenly round Blanc's legs and pulled. 'Worm yourself; he said as he smashed Blanc to the floor. With a single fluid movement, he pulled Blanc's firebrand away from him and swept Gath's feet from under her.

Gath screamed in surprise as she fell. Her gun skidded away across the floor. Stabilo held Blanc's firebrand in his left hand, and thumped him hard in the face with his right fist. 'How's that for flamboyant charm?' he demanded as he pulled himself up, dropped the burning torch, and followed the rush for the doors.

From behind the rush came the sound of Blanc's screams of rage, and the running feet and hooves of the creatures as they chased after the survivors. The Doctor, Fitz and Sam found themselves at the front of the rush, pushed forward. The President, Phillips and Bigdog were close behind. Cage and a couple of guards brought up the rear. There were few others left now.

Fitz pushed at the doors. And pushed again. The Doctor, Sam, Stabilo, Bigdog all put their weight against them.

Blanc's voice cut through the air, above the snarls of his creatures and the groans of the dying left behind. 'You didn't really think we'd leave them unlocked, did you?'

'Security priority,' Cage shouted. 'Doors open.' They pushed again. And the doors remained locked shut. 'They've overridden the command codes,' Stabilo said. 'Can't we shoot the lock out?' Fitz asked. Stabilo looked at him. 'Just a thought; Fitz said.

Stabilo turned to the Doctor. Behind them, the creatures were slowly advancing again, seeming to savour the moment. 'You try.'

The Doctor was apologetic. 'I have a sonic screwdriver for these sorts of occasions, but I didn't think to bring it with me, I'm afraid.'

'I meant, try asking the doors to open.'

'Don't be -' Fitz started to say. Stabilo looked at him again. 'Sorry.'

Then Stabilo looked back at the Doctor, his expression deadly serious. The Doctor looked from Stabilo to Fitz to Sam to the doors. 'Doors open,' he said without much enthusiasm. 'Please.'

There was a loud click and the doors opened. Browning Phillips, who had been pushing against them, fell through. President Drexler was close behind him.

There was a cry of rage from Blanc and everyone poured out into the foyer.

'How did I do that?' the Doctor asked as he helped Drexler to her feet.

'Easy,' Stabilo said, pushing the doors closed behind them. 'You own the

place.'

'I do? Oh, and doors lock, by the way. 'There was a heavy click from the door behind them.

Stabilo nodded. 'That chip you have. With the accrued interest, if you were to cash it in you'd bankrupt Vega. Close us down.' Behind him there was a loud hammering from the closed door. 'The only legal way to stay open was to make you the owner, in absentia as it were.'

The Doctor nodded. 'I own the place,' he said modestly, spreading his arms wide as if to embrace it. He frowned suddenly. 'So that's why you tried to kill me.' But his attention was focused on Phillips, and the gun he was holding to the President's head. 'What's your excuse?' he asked.

'Do I need one?' Phillips asked quietly. He pressed the gun into Drexler's temple, his finger closed around the trigger as he looked from the Doctor to Stabilo. Everything seemed to have stopped. The sound, movement, time. 'I should have warned them about you,' Phillips said to Stabilo. Then he called out to Cage and the two remaining guards, 'Put your weapons down, if you would, please.' They obliged, carefully, slowly. Phillips motioned with a jerk of his head for them to move to one side. 'Thank you,' he said, and turned the gun to face them.

His first shot took one of the guards in the chest, knocking him back off his feet and slamming him into the wall. The second guard ran, heading for the corridor. Phillips calmly tracked him with the gun, and fired. The force of the bullet swept the still-running man over the safety rail and into the central well of Vega. It did not kill him outright, for his scream could be heard receding into the distance as he fell.

Phillips turned back to Cage. 'Not running?' he asked.

'There's nowhere to go,' Cage said. 'For either of us.'

'How true,' Phillips agreed. 'Now I think the rest of us will just step back inside the exhibition. We have a little unfinished business to attend to. And I'd hate to keep Mr Blanc and his associates waiting any longer than we have to.'

Chapter Sixteen

Murdering art

After a hurried conversation between Blanc and Phillips, the prisoners were assembled in the middle of the exhibition. The creatures scurried round them, never getting very close, but always hissing and baring their claws, teeth and almost anything else they possessed that was particularly sharp.

'What are they doing?' Drexler demanded, her voice quavering. 'What do they want?'

'You dead,' Stabilo said flatly. 'I think that much is apparent. Phillips, I assume, is still working for his former employers. Or at least, those who sympathise with them.'

Drexler's lip curled. 'Loyalty or money? I wonder.'

'Money?' the Doctor murmured. 'What vulgar motives.' He glanced at Rappare without comment, then cleared his throat. 'And talking of motives, the acts of sabotage before you arrived, and now your death here... I think it's all designed to look as if the Canvines were responsible.'

'That's ridiculous,' Drexler said. 'Nobody would believe -'

'I'm afraid many will believe,' Bigdog interrupted. 'There is still much paranoia and xenophobia on both our worlds. I had hoped we could step forward together into a new future.' He looked towards where Gath and Blanc were setting up some equipment. 'It looks as though it will be a leap backward instead.'

'I imagine there are certain vested interests in maintaining the status quo, or even exacerbating the problem,' the Doctor said. 'And xenophobia, when all's said and done, is a powerful emotion in and of itself.' He tapped his chin thoughtfully. 'I think Phillips is full of it.'

Stabilo gave a short laugh. 'So do I, Doctor. And I've known him a long time.'

'I'm afraid,' Bigdog said, 'that there are those in both our races who would rather we were at war, whether for ideological or fanatical

reasons.'

Sam was watching Gath and Blanc on the other side of the hall. 'What are they doing, Doctor?' she asked, her voice trembling slightly. 'That looks like the equipment for making the pictures.'

'Group photograph?' Fitz suggested. 'Bags I be the one to run round to the other end and be in it twice.'

'I'm afraid you may be right; the Doctor agreed as Phillips approached the small group of people. He stepped over a body as if it were a small and inconvenient puddle.

'No, Doctor.' Sam clutched at his arm. 'I couldn't go through that again. Please.'

Phillips joined them, gun levelled. 'I thought I'd better - how shall I phrase this? - put you in the picture.'

'Oh, very funny,' Sam said. 'Yes, wit indeed. Chuckle chuckle.'

Phillips ignored her. 'I should like to have a record of this historic moment. For posterity. What do you say?' He turned to go, obviously expecting no answer.

But the Doctor replied anyway. 'I say more wealth than you can possibly imagine. And I think you can imagine quite a lot of it.'

Phillips turned slowly. 'A wealthy benefactor? Eccentric billionaire?' He clearly was not convinced.

The Doctor seemed not to notice the sarcastic edge to his words, and polished his nails on his jacket lapel with feigned modesty. 'Something of the sort,' he admitted. Then he took the gaming chip from his pocket and flipped it in the air. His eyes were on Phillips as the man watched it turn over and over before the Doctor snatched it back into his fist. 'Money,' he mouthed at Phillips. 'Enough to bankrupt Vega, enough to own this place and lots more besides. Call the bank and check, if you like, though you heard Stabilo tell me earlier, I'm sure.'

'Doctor,' Stabilo said urgently, 'you can't.'

'Why not?' The Doctor's voice was loud and angry. 'If it saves our lives.'

'I don't think it will be necessary to spare any of you,' Phillips said, watching their reactions carefully. 'I can just take the chip from you. Either I force it from you now, or relieve you of it when you are in the painting - it makes very little difference to me.'

'Oh, but it does, you know.' The Doctor was smiling. "This isn't one of your new-fangled trade-it-at-the-bank chips like back home on Batturul. This is keyed to my biological print. Unless I assign it over to you, willingly, it won't work.'

'He's right,' Stabilo agreed. 'You'll never be able to use it.'

Blanc and Gath had finished setting up. The control console had been wheeled out from the screened-off area beside the door, and the projectors were pointing towards where the group of people stood. The self-portrait of Martinique stood on its easel between the various pieces of equipment, as if watching the process. The creatures lurked in the shadows all around, their eyes gleaming with anticipation. They too seemed to be drawn to the picture of Martinique.

'There is a slight problem,' Gadi said as she approached Phillips. She indicated the Doctor. 'Somehow the Doctor can resist the process.' She pointed at Sam. 'And she somehow got out.'

'How?'

'I don't know.'

The Doctor smiled smugly. 'Ready to do a deal?' he asked.

'Just you, then, Doctor,' Phillips said. 'No one else.'

The Doctor opened his hands wide and stepped out of the group. 'Fair enough; he said, flicking a speck of dust from the top of the easel holding the picture of Martinique.

Bigdog snarled behind him. Sam gasped and Fitz stood open-mouthed. Stabilo sighed as if he had expected this. Drexler looked pale and drawn, but showed no other emotion.

'Oh; the Doctor said as he stopped beside Gath. His face was a mask of innocence and contrition. 'Just one teeny-weeny condition.'

'I said just you.' The anger made Phillips's voice loud. It echoed round the hall.

'Agreed, absolutely. But,' the Doctor said almost apologetically, tapping his finger on the frame of the Martinique self-portrait, 'I should like this painting.'

Phillips frowned, watching as the Doctor breathed heavily on the gaming chip and then polished it on his sleeve. 'Well,' he said slowly, 'I don't see -'

'No!' Blanc's voice was like thunder and he stormed across. 'Absolutely not.'

The Doctor sighed. The chip spun in the air and landed in his open jacket pocket. 'Deal's off, then,' he said and strode back to the group.

'Where is Martinique?' Fitz asked him quietly.

'Oh, faded into the background, it seems.'

'What are you up to?' Sam asked.

But the Doctor just smiled.

'Why ever not?' Phillips was demanding of Blanc. 'What's the problem? It's just a painting.'

'Just a painting?' Blanc said in disbelief.

'Surely your ego can afford to let just one of Martinique's pictures belong to someone else.'

'That's not the point,' Gath said. 'If he, if it -' She seemed unable to complete the thought. 'The process,' she hissed.

'Oh, I don't care about that,' Phillips shouted. 'What do I care if Martinique is in there or not?' He waved at the picture. 'He can't touch me. He never knew me. Never painted me.'

'Nor us,' Blanc said emphatically. 'But that doesn't mean -'

'The Doctor can have the painting,' Phillips said through clenched teeth.

Blanc stared at him for a moment. His face was set, his jaw clenched. Then he turned and walked off, towards the entrance of the exhibition. Towards where his abandoned firebrand still burned where it lay on the floor.

'Well, I'm glad that's sorted,' the Doctor said rubbing his hands together. Then, as if he knew what was about to happen, he stepped back, away from the picture.

Blanc had returned, carrying the firebrand. It was burning strongly again now, fuelled by a gas canister inside. Before Phillips could stop him he touched it to the painting. Immediately flames sprang up from the canvas surface, engulfing the picture. For a while, Martinique's face was visible in the midst of the flame, staring out accusingly at Blanc. Then the canvas curled over it, paint dripping away and oily smoke billowing up out of reach of the lights.

'I wish we'd had a few of them,' Fitz said to Sam.

'What a waste,' Rappare murmured.

But his words were drowned out by the roars and cries of rage from around the hall. 'What have you done?' the Devourer's voice rumbled as it stepped from the shadows and bore down on Blanc. 'Murderer,' it bellowed. Behind it goblins, wolves, elves, wraiths gathered. They stalked towards Blanc, Gath and Phillips.

'It's only a painting,' Phillips said, taking a step backward. 'What are you doing?' He took another step back. 'If it weren't for us, if it weren't for my funding of Blanc's research, you would still be trapped inside your precious pictures.'

But the Devourer kept coming. Its snarling filled the hall, the stench of its breath hung in the air.

'Stop,' Blanc shouted. 'Stop, I'm warning you.'

But it did not stop. Arms outstretched, it reached for Blanc.

And he reached forward with the firebrand again. But not at the Devourer. Blanc whirled round and lunged at the painting Defying the

Angel . For the briefest space of time the Angel continued to stare upward at the space where the Devourer had been, at the empty blue sky. Then the flames engulfed her.

At the same moment as the Angel blistered and blackened, the Devourer of Souls collapsed to its knees. Its face was running, melting, bubbling. Black smoke erupted from the Devourer's body and tears of viscous paint ran down its discoloured cheeks. It roared in rage and pain, holding its hands up as if watching as they peeled back to the blackened canvas beneath. A small, foul-smelling pool formed round the remains of the monster's feet as it collapsed in on itself, folded up like a discarded sheet.

Behind the Devourer, the other creatures were already backing away from Blanc, holding hands protectively over faces and shrinking back into the shadows. Then they stopped, turned slowly to watch the figure that pushed past them into the light.

'I have seen enough,' Toulour Martinique said. 'More than enough.'

'But,' Blanc stammered, 'but... the painting.' He stared in disbelief at the charred remains of the self-portrait on the blackened, still-smoking easel.

Martinique gave short laugh. 'That fake. Do you think I would be so obvious? As obvious and transparent as you were. You and that harlot.' He stared at Gath, who was standing quite still, looking down at the floor. 'Did you think I didn't know?' he asked more quietly. Martinique shook his head. 'I always knew.'

'Then where?' Blanc asked, the firelight flickering on his face, lined with worry.

It was the Doctor who answered. "The picture where you imprisoned Sam.'

Martinique nodded. 'I painted in the equipment so I could get out whenever I wanted. That's how Sam escaped.' He smiled, the paint round his mouth cracking slightly under the pressure. Just for a moment, then he was serious again. 'Vermilion was not so lucky, though, was she? Her reward for trying to blackmail you after she realised where the creature that had attacked her had come from. But for myself, a nice pastoral scene, sunshine, an easel and my paints. What more could a man want? Apart,' he said to Gath, 'from the love of a devoted woman?'

Only Phillips seemed unmoved by Martinique's appearance. 'You have no place here,' he said loudly.

'No place?' The Doctor was astounded. 'I'd say his place here is more tenable than yours.'

'Nothing changes,' Phillips said. 'Another execution, that's all.'

'You can't harm us.' Gath's voice trembled with emotion as she looked up at Martinique at last. 'You never painted us. We are safe from you.'

'You know,' the Doctor said, his voice calm, reasonable, 'I'm not altogether sure that's true.' He was holding his hip flask, brandishing it almost like a weapon. 'I have a little theory. Would you indulge me a moment?'

He did not wait for an answer, but set off towards the back of the exhibition hall. Martinique followed, the creatures close on his heels, apparently in awe of their creator. Phillips and Blanc exchanged looks, then herded their prisoners after them.

The Doctor was standing in front of *Murdering art*. He had unstopped the flask and upended it on to his handkerchief. 'May I?' he asked Martinique.

'Of course.'

'You see,' the Doctor said. 'I don't think this painting is called *Murdering art* at all.' He reached out and dabbed at the painted inscription with the damp handkerchief, rubbing ever so gently on the paintwork. 'The strange capitalisation, the gap between the words,' he said as he rubbed. 'The way they are not quite centred. Ah, that's it.' He straightened up and moved aside.

Everyone crowded round to look - Blanc, Gath, Phillips, the prisoners. Even the creatures craned their necks and peered out of the gloom at the inscription. Only the Doctor and Martinique seemed not to be staring in fascination at the bottom of the painting. Where the Doctor had rubbed with the paint stripper, the oil paint had faded and smeared away. And revealed underneath, where it had been written before being partly painted over, it said:

MURDERING MARTINIQUE.

'My death,' the painter said quietly. 'I told you, I always knew.'

'But how, how did you know?' Gath asked, her face drained of colour.

'I'm not stupid. I knew I was going to die. So I painted myself into a picture. Well before I painted this.' He nodded at Murdering Martinique . 'When I died, the real me, the painted version - this Martinique you see now - emerged to paint the scene. One form dies, but the other is preserved in the paintwork.' He shook his head, remembering. 'You should have seen your reaction when you found it.' He shook his head, remembering. 'I was going to leave the title, let everyone know what happened. But then I changed my mind. Why not wait? I thought. Wait for the a more appropriate juncture. What else had I left to do? So I painted out the name.'

'But only some of the name," the Doctor pointed out.

'It seemed an appropriate title.' He gave a slight smile. 'And I was conscious of the need to hurry. It doesn't do to be found beside a recently dead body. Particularly your own.'

'You knew? How much did you know?' Blanc said, his voice strained.

'Oh I knew of your secret deal with Phillips to reverse engineer my technology. I knew of Miss Gath's infidelity - her affair with you, my so-called sponsor. And I knew of your plan to inflate the price of my paintings. That's what it was, after all - finance, pure and simple. Nothing personal, I know. And that somehow hurt even more.' He stepped up to Blanc, ignoring the firebrand he held, and stared him in the face. 'Have you any idea what it feels like to die? Have you?' He pointed back at the picture, at the central figure, its head pulled back for the knife at its throat. 'To die like that?' He looked away. 'Maybe you will find out.'

'I think you're forgetting who is in control here.' Phillips's voice was calm from the back of the group. 'Now, if the minor theatricals are over, perhaps we may continue.'

'Just one more minor theatrical, I think,' the Doctor said. 'If I may.' He did not wait for an answer, but shook a few final drops from his flask on to his hanky. 'You mentioned you had other things to do. It wasn't just the title you decided to mask and save for a later revelation, now was it?' the

Doctor said to Martinique. Then he turned and rubbed quickly, first at one, then the other, of the grotesque figures holding the dying man.

The faces - the masks - came away easily, and with a terrible inevitability. Gath and Blanc both stepped back. Gath shouted something incoherent. Blanc made no noise at all, just shaking his head and breathing heavily.

Beneath the masks, the faces of the figures in the painting were revealed: the murderers. Henri Blanc drawing the knife across the man's neck as Tullus Gath jerked his head back.

'Why so amazed?' the Doctor asked. 'Starting like a guilty thing. Don't you remember killing him?'

'Murderers.' The sound was a barely audible hiss at first. 'Murderers.' Then it grew steadily in volume as the creatures closed in on Blanc and Gath. Blanc was backing away into the group of prisoners, the firebrand held in front of him in defence. Rappare yelped as Blanc backed into him, and jumped aside. Gath was almost whimpering with terror as she too backed away. Phillips was shouting, calling for them to calm down, for the creatures to stand still, waving his gun.

It seemed set to continue as a stand-off. Then Bigdog stepped forward, grabbed Blanc's arm and dragged the firebrand from his grasp. With a howl of rage he hurled it across the room and pushed Blanc across towards Gath. There was utter silence broken only by the sound of the firebrand falling to the floor. Its flames dwindled and died.

'Murderers .' It was a shout now, a battle cry, as the creatures again closed in on Blanc and Gath.

The prisoners backed away, ignoring Phillips's shouts and gesticulation. Fitz was at the back of the group, moving fastest. Which was why he fell over the body. As he landed heavily on his side, his face was close to the remains of the guard he had stumbled over. He cried out in disgust and alarm and tried to get up, slipping in the mess on the floor. And then he saw the remote-control device.

It was poking out of the guard's torn pocket, barely visible. Fitz grabbed it.

Gath was shooting, her bullets ripping useless holes in the advancing

creatures. One of them caught Cage in the shoulder as she tried to shield the President. She twisted away with a cry of pain. Blanc was shouting, screaming almost. And Phillips was ignoring them, bringing his gun to bear on the group of prisoners.

Stabilo launched himself at Phillips with a shout of rage. Phillips fired, the shot going wide as he tumbled backward. But he was re-aiming already, tracking Stabilo, squeezing the trigger.

Fitz ripped the device from the pocket and squeezed the red button.

Stabilo hurled himself to one side, the bullet catching him in the arm, spinning him across the room.

And Murdering Martinique exploded into flames.

So did Blanc and Gath. As the creatures closed in on them, they both erupted, their whole bodies seeming to blister and bubble. Flames licked out from inside them, tiny flickers of light at first. But before long each was a screaming fireball of orange and red. The smoke hung in the air, pungent, catching at the throat, as the twin sources of it collapsed in on themselves. Burning puddles pooled out at what had been their feet as they writhed, their shouts and shrieks absorbed by the sound of the fire as it spread through the hall and took hold.

The painting had exploded outward in a sheet of sudden flame, engulfing the other paintings and displays nearby. Now the whole pathway through the exhibition was lit not by spotlights but by flickering, shimmering, oily flames as the fire took hold. All around, creatures collapsed and melted, burning away as their paintings were torched. In the middle of it all, Martinique stood looking round in desperation, dabbing at his forehead with a grimy cloth, and shaking his head. His face was running wet, and his coat was beginning to smoulder.

He watched as the equipment in the middle of the room caught light, then exploded in a fireball of crimson flame. The twin projectors toppled forward, one of them smashing into Forster's dead wheelchair in a parody of steel sculpture. All around him, his paintings caught light and burned.

He was still standing there when the sprinklers came on.

The Doctor stood directly under a sprinkler, letting the cool water spray over him, drenching his hair and running down his face. His own coat had begun to smoulder uncomfortably. He peered through the mist of water droplets at the gun that Browning Phillips was holding close to his face. In the distance he could see his own portrait - it seemed to have survived intact. And then, close by, movement...

'The chip?' the Doctor asked. But his eyes were not on Phillips. He was watching the bearlike creature that was lolloping across the room towards them. Its huge fangs were dripping with the spray from the sprinklers. Its dark fur was matted and soaked, steaming hot as it skittered on the wet floor.

'The chip.'

'You could never use it.'

'We'll see.' Phillips jabbed the gun into the Doctor's cheek.

The Doctor felt in his pocket, slowly pulling out the chip. He held it out. Phillips's hand closed on the chip, and the Doctor held on to it for just long enough. Then he smiled, slightly sadly, and let go.

Just as the massive creature reared up on its hind legs and grabbed Phillips from behind, embracing him so hard he dropped his gun. It skidded away on the wet floor. Phillips held tight to the chip, shouting, screaming something at the Doctor as the huge bearlike creature dragged him away into the mist.

Somewhere nearby, Fitz was saying to Stabilo, 'Like I said, it never rains on Vega.'

As the temperature dropped, the sprinkler system cut out. The water was drained away through the floor-level air-conditioning vents - a neat system which had won a design award before the side effects had been realised. Right now the water would be venting into someone's apartment two levels down.

'As receptions go,' President Drexler observed, 'I've had cooler ones.'

'At least some of the paintings survived intact,' Sam said, looking round as the mist cleared. 'Where's Martinique?'

'Where's Phillips?' Stabilo asked, holding his wounded arm tight across his chest.

'One of the creatures was dragging him that way, last I saw.' Cage nodded towards where the equipment was set up. Blood was oozing through the shoulder of her uniform.

'I think they're both still with us somewhere,' the Doctor said. He brushed wet, black dust from the middle of the pastoral scene where Sam had been imprisoned. Sure enough, at the easel on the hillside, there now sat a painter. He was facing towards the front of the frame, reaching out with his hand as if to gauge the perspective. Or perhaps to wave.

'Over here,' Rappare called from across the hall.

They all picked their way over to where he stood in front of another painting. The edges of it were singed, and the frame was almost burned away, but the painting was mainly intact. It showed a cloister or church - dimly lit with vaulted ceiling and Roman archway through to another stone room. In the archway, emerging from the gloom beyond, was a huge bearlike creature with dark, matted fur and protruding fangs. It was on all fours. Beneath it, held down by a massive paw, was a man. He was reaching out of the picture, his face a contorted scream as the creature bore down on him.

It was General Browning Phillips. And in his outstretched hand, clutched tight, was a small round gaming chip.

Chapter Seventeen

Closure

They all stared at the picture in silence for a while.

'He'll never spend it now,' Rappare said at last.

'And neither shall I,' the Doctor added. He turned to Stabilo. 'Not that I would have done, you know. But Vega's safe in your hands now.'

Stabilo shook his head. 'I doubt it. I expect they'll shut this place down. We have no future, not officially, not with the observation post destroyed.'

'Yes and no.' It was President Drexler who spoke. 'Vega's original purpose is obsolete,' she agreed, 'though not for the reason you suppose. Circumstances change.'

'Beg pardon, Ma'am?'

'I'm sorry to have to admit,' the President said. Then she paused. 'No, I'm not sorry at all actually. I don't much care for Martinique's work. Never did.'

'Then why?' Sam began.

'A ruse. A cover. I needed to visit Vega, and nobody, not even Phillips or my closest staff, could know why.'

'She came to see me,' Bigdog said. 'We have been negotiating a new treaty, a real and lasting peace. An end to this nonsense.' Water dripped from his fur as he nodded his huge shaggy head. 'A final irony for Browning Phillips, perhaps. I hope he can hear us.'

'He can,' Sam said softly. 'He certainly can.'

'So what happens now?' Stabilo asked. 'I mean, after we've cleaned up this lot.' He looked round the room, his face a mask of disgust and anger. 'What a waste.'

Cage slightly touched Stabilo's arm. 'Many good people died here,' she said quietly. 'We all have to do whatever we can to make this work now.'

'I would suggest,' the Doctor said as he led them towards the exit, 'that President Drexler won't want to admit to Vega's real purpose. Especially with this treaty negotiation at a sensitive stage.' He wrapped an arm round the President, another round Stabilo, and ignored their looks of surprise. 'So she may well decide to float Vega off as a going concern. Privatised it, under its existing management.' He released them to open the door. 'I hope your books are all in order.'

'I'll ask Slavich,' Stabilo said thinly. 'He never comes to these sorts of events,' he added. 'Says they're boring.'

For once, Stabilo was sitting at the bar in the casino. He held a large beer in his hand as he perched on a tall stool beside the Doctor. His other arm was in a sling.

'You know,' he said, 'I never realised how attached I am to this place. How much I actually like the job.'

'Like you said, it's strange how the prospect of losing something makes you want it more,' the Doctor agreed. "Thanks for letting me take the portrait, by the way. I shall hang it in pride of place in the, er, back home.' He sipped at his ginger beer and smacked his lips in appreciation. 'You keep a good cellar.'

'Oh, I hate the trappings,' Stabilo was saying. "The role I was forced to play - Phillips's joke. Well, the joke's on him now.'

'Never speak ill of the undead,' the Doctor admonished lightly.

'I thought the President was coming to shut us down. And I thought you would bankrupt us.' He shook his head and then took a swig of beer. 'Blanc and Gath were about the only ones I wasn't worried about.'

'They knew Phillips from way back,' the Doctor said. "They went to him for funding and expertise to get Martinique's equipment working after they killed him. Phillips saw other uses for the equipment. Principally as a way of getting weapons, albeit rather strange ones, on to Vega.'

'I think Solarin's approach was more straightforward. And he could just have asked.'

'Too much of a gamble, perhaps,' the Doctor said with a grin.

'I think Cage will be all right,' Stabilo said distantly. "They say she lost a bit of blood, but there's no serious damage to her shoulder.'

'Ah, Stabilo. There you are.' The gruff voice made Stabilo freeze, his eyes widen. He turned slowly to face its owner.

'Mr Antherzon.' Stabilo was all charm. 'How nice to see you. Everything all right?'

'As it happens, no it isn't.' The man leaned forward, his face dangerously close to Stabile's. I was in my room earlier, when suddenly water started pouring in through the air-conditioning vents.'

Stabilo showed no emotion at all as he asked. 'Did you get wet?'

'Wet, sir?' Antherzon was bristling, his hands clenching and unclenching at his side. 'Wet? I was soaked. Soaked through. To the skin.'

'Oh.' Stabilo said. 'Oh dear.'

There was a pause before Antherzon exploded, 'Oh dear? Is that all you have to say? What about my room? My clothes and belongings? My wife's second-best wig is ruined, our bed is soaked.' He leaned even closer to Stabilo. 'I demand compensation.'

'I'll see you're given a new room and your things are dried out,' Stabilo said dismissively and turned back to face the Doctor.

Antherzon grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back round. 'I demand -' he started.

But he got no further. 'You demand too much,' Stabilo said loudly. He knocked Antherzon's hand away from his shoulder and slipped off the stool. He was a good deal taller than Antherzon when he stood up and stared down at him angrily. 'I have had enough of it,' he said.

Antherzon flinched, blinked. He looked puzzled, confused and worried all at once.

'If things aren't good enough for you here,' Stabilo went on, 'then you can

leave. I shall be happy to have your bags packed for you and a place reserved on the next shuttle. I'm trying to run a business here, and I can manage better without you demanding all over the place. There is a limit, sir, the lengths we will go in the pursuit of good customer relations.' He sat down again. 'For one thing, they presuppose a good customer. Good day, Mr Antherzon.'

Antherzon stood for a moment open-mouthed. Then he closed his mouth. And opened it again. And repeated the process several times. Eventually, he grunted something inaudible and marched off.

Stabilo took a long drink. 'I feel better for that,' he said to the Doctor.

The Doctor was looking across the casino to where Fitz and Sam were sitting with Rappare. 'I think I'll just check on my friends, if you'll excuse me.'

'Of course, Doctor.'

'If you've come for a game of cards,' Rappare said as the Doctor sat down, 'then you can count me out.'

'Given up playing?' the Doctor inquired.

'Only with you, Doctor.'

'Perhaps if you didn't cheat,' Sam said.

'Cheat? A little honest cheating never hurt anyone.'

'What about burning their paintings to push up the value of yours?' Sam asked.

'Better than murdering the painter,' Rappare pointed out reasonably.

'An interesting point,' the Doctor conceded. 'What will you do now?'

Rappare shrugged. 'I'll sell the shop. Not much point in staying here. Find somewhere quiet and try to make a crust.' He smiled. 'Maybe an antique one with a fascinating history and market potential.'

'Why don't you do fakes?' Fitz said suddenly.

'I do.' Rappare said with a frown.

'No you don't. You do forgeries.'

Rappare's frown deepened. 'Go on.'

Fitz shrugged. 'Just a thought. In this crazy universe you can probably sell genuine copies for more money than the originals.'

'Yeah,' Sam said. 'Get your own exhibition, not gatecrash someone else's.'

Rappare said nothing, but there was a thoughtful look on his face.

'Get someone famous to open it,' Fitz suggested. 'Maybe not the President,' he added. 'But you could have a celebrity guest.'

'You free for the occasion, Doctor?' Sam asked.

'Almost any occasion,' the Doctor said. 'But to return to the more immediate future, I think there's someone coming this way who wants a word with you, Fitz.' He grinned. 'Judging by the way he's heading straight for you.'

Fitz turned, and the smile disappeared from his face in an instant. 'Oh no,' he said as Bigdog arrived beside him and clamped a heavy paw on his shoulder.

'Excuse me for not getting up,' Fitz said, wincing with the pain.

'You and I have unfinished business,' Bigdog said, not releasing his grip.

'Do we?' Fitz asked. 'Ah,' he said with difficulty. 'So we do.'

'You have insulted me. Several times.' Bigdog sat on the chair next to Fitz, finally letting go of his shoulder. Sam jumped off the chair just in time. 'My Canvine honour demands satisfaction.'

'Er, you couldn't just forget about it?' Fitz asked, trying to massage some life back into his shoulder. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a battered packet of Camels. 'Cigarette?'

Bigdog stared at the packet for a moment. Then he took it from Fitz, crumpled it into a ball and tossed it over his shoulder.

'Non-smoker, eh?' Sam said. 'Very healthy.'

'What sort of honourable reparation were you looking for?' the Doctor asked. His tone was casual, but there was a glint of steel in his eyes.

'That depends on what the young man has to offer.'

'Er,' Fitz said. 'Well. There is a tradition on my world.' He glanced at Sam. 'A custom amongst young men - in my time, anyway. A sort of bonding ceremony. Eternal friendship, all for one and one for all.' He gulped. 'That sort of thing.'

'Tell me more.' Bigdog's eyes narrowed to red slits. His teeth were bared as he waited.

So Fitz told him.

Bigdog's jaw opened slightly, allowing a dribble of saliva to escape and drip to the floor. He nodded slowly. 'Yes,' he growled. Then he slapped Fitz hard on the back, sending him sprawling across the table. The guttural laugh echoed round the casino. 'Yes, that will do very well indeed.'

'Oh,' Fitz said. 'Good.' And he started to laugh too, nervously at first, but then in relief and good humour. The Doctor and Sam were smiling, evidently pleased with the outcome. Fitz waved his index finger at a waiter attracted by the noise, wincing as the muscle in his shoulder strained.

'Yes, sir?'

'Two pints of beer and a packet of crisps, please,' Fitz said